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# Tearfund’s Decolonisation Journey— from Jubilee to the Present

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In this article, we explore what decolonisation means to the faith-based organisation Tearfund, outlining several of the organisation’s practical efforts to intentionally “reset” and decolonise its corporate culture, organisational structures, and ways of working. The theological motivation behind this organisational journey was set in motion during its Jubilee year in 2017, which sparked a renewed focus on restoring relationships, including those affected by colonialism and/or racism. The article traces an arc from 2017 to 2023, outlining organisational initiatives that aim to shift power and maximise inclusion. The purpose of so doing is to assess how the organisation’s ongoing shift from being a British charity towards becoming an authentically inclusive, global organisation has fared.

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Tearfund is a Christian charity mobilising communities and churches worldwide to help end extreme poverty and injustice. To this end, staff work alongside churches and organisations in more than fifty countries around the world to restore the four broken relationships—with God, with nature, with ourselves and with others (Tearfund 2019b). The restoration of relationships inevitably includes relationships broken by colonialism, although it is important to acknowledge that understanding the consequences of colonialism “when these harms span centuries and still shape our lives” can be complicated (Otele 2023).

## Definition of Decolonisation

There are many differing understandings of decolonisation. Its original use related to the physical and political process whereby colonies gained

independence from colonial powers, and self-determination and inviolability of borders became generally accepted norms. In the current era, many regard decolonisation as pertaining to a process of “undoing colonial rule,” or more specifically, becoming free of colonial ideology, as well as challenging existing “positions of power and dominant culture” (Warwick University 2018) and having the freedom to create representation.<sup>2</sup>

Over a period of hundreds of years, the process of colonisation extracted wealth and resources on a vast scale with little regard for the devastation wreaked on indigenous knowledge, identities, and lives. It manifested differently depending on context and time period: from the unspeakably cruel and concentrated colonial period in the Congo starting in 1885 with Leopold II’s bloody reign, to the “500-year-long

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<sup>2</sup> “Postcolonial critics, Edward Said or Gayatri Spivak among them, argue that the coloniser enacted violence not by mere military force but by conquering historical representation. Those who were oppressed were forced to the margins, erased. ‘To decolonise the mind is therefore to empower the mind with the ability to self-represent: to understand one’s history, to write one’s history, to create one’s own representation’” (Danaparamita 2019).

colonial project” in the Philippines (Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs 2022), to Ghanaians and Haitians taking pride in throwing off the yoke of colonisation, and to the many in Southern African countries who still view decolonisation as work in progress.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the consequences of colonialism continue to reverberate across generations, including through the perpetuation of poverty, injustice, and inequality. Colonial practices can be unwittingly perpetuated, for example, through replication of dominant (often Western) cultural practices; through power imbalances and “inherited” hierarchies, and through shameful patterns of separation of faith communities. Given that the relief and development sector in the UK also “reflects the power relationships of colonialism” (House of Commons 2022), Tearfund has rightly been challenged about the enduring legacy of colonialism, as well as its own role in the West’s representation of itself (Zadeh-Cummings 2022). We have come to realise that we cannot do our work in ways that are just unless we decolonise our own practices and attitudes too.

In terms of the moral and practical imperative for Tearfund, then, decolonisation takes on a dimension that is personal, pressing, and current. As one colleague from the Philippines observed: “Colonialism has caused deep wounds which will take a long time to heal—and both perpetrator and victim need healing.”<sup>4</sup>

In this article, we explore what decolonisation means to Tearfund and outline some of our practical efforts to intentionally “reset” and decolonise our corporate culture, organisational structures, and ways of working. We use first person plural pronouns to refer to Tearfund since for us the purpose of this article is to tell a story about the journey that we have been on as an organisation. We trace an arc leading from 2017 to the present (2023) and assess how our ongoing shift from British charity towards an authentically inclusive, global organisation has fared. We detail specific organisational initiatives that aim to shift power and maximise inclusion.<sup>5</sup> Before doing so, however, we briefly explain how Tearfund’s Jubilee period helped create a theological foundation for Tearfund’s organisational

renewal with a focus on restoring relationships, including those affected by colonialism and/or racism.

## Jubilee as Foundation

In hindsight, Tearfund’s Jubilee year in 2018—its 50th year—stands out as a significant spiritual milestone in the organisation’s decolonisation journey. Jubilee’s underlying theology is one of:

justice: redemption and restoration; liberation and renewal...being radical and counter-cultural—both in the ancient world and today—and prophetic... [providing] a model for a community living *well* according to God’s will for his creation so that they can flourish and thrive as individuals and a community, and so that they can be an example, or light, to the rest of the world (Tearfund 2018c).

This theology provided Tearfund with an opportunity to consciously decide how to conduct itself going forward and provided a foundational basis for doing so. Tearfund’s Jubilee preparations from 2017 and the celebrations and reflections during 2018 not only created organisational, church, and supporter resources that helped Tearfund celebrate its 50th year, but also provided evidence and contemplation on the wider role of faith in development and on Tearfund’s place in that journey. Jubilee devotional prayer spaces and celebrations were held across the organisation, including a global Jubilee staff conference from which flowed organisational commitments based on what we believed God was calling us to focus on as individuals and as an organisation going forward; namely, freedom from injustice, oppression, and poverty; and restoration of relationships.

Not only did Jubilee and its foundational theology provide us with the opportunity to reflect collectively as an organisation, but it also helped create a shared desire for organisational healing and renewal, which through the creation of various organisational initiatives also helped achieve greater receptiveness and collaboration with regard to anti-racism and decolonisation efforts. Dr Ruth Valerio, our Head of Global Advocacy and

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<sup>3</sup> “They talk to me about progress, about ‘achievements,’ diseases cured, improved standards of living. I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out” (Césaire 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Rei Lemuel Crizaldo, Personal communication, 1 November 2022.

<sup>5</sup> The term “shifting power” is contentious, but within the sector tends to be used in relation to existing power structures that need to be challenged. Cariona Dejean, head of strategy at Tearfund, has pointed out that merely “shifting power” could inadvertently shift unhelpful power dynamics or bad practices from the UK to regions; the act of moving power elsewhere is insufficient, we need to change the very nature of the power dynamic itself by rethinking how we hold power, regardless of where we are sitting in the world. Thus, she notes that the term “recalibration of power” might be more helpful.

Influencing, wrote at the time: “We believe that the essence of Jubilee is its provision of a way of life for God’s redeemed, liberated people, enabling us to flourish and thrive through the restoration of our relationships with God, with an understanding of ourselves as God’s children, with one another, and with all creation” (Tearfund 2018b). Our Jubilee, with its shared principle of restoration, helped us, as an organisation, lay the foundation for a ‘reset’ of our structures, values, and enablers. It also strengthened our organisational resolve to embed diversity and inclusion (D&I) as a key organisational enabler,<sup>6</sup> to live out our values at work and model the restoration of relationships, which has become an integral part of our decolonisation efforts.

### **Restoration of Relationships**

Adopting a wider understanding of decolonisation is important to us as a faith-based international non-governmental organisation (INGO), because our vision is to restore broken relationships, by extension also those relationships damaged by colonialism as well as practices and attitudes flowing from the legacy of colonialism. We have found it helpful to view decolonisation within Tearfund as a journey that requires us to continually work at (1) being as inclusive as possible, including fostering an inclusive culture and (2) shifting or recalibrating power.<sup>7</sup> While we acknowledge that decolonisation as a concept is distinct from D&I work, in practice there is a significant overlap between the two. D&I helps create the necessary awareness and desire to change the “traditional, and exclusionary norms and culture of an institution” (Blackwood 2020). It is important to recognise, however, that decolonisation may have different nuances depending on history, culture, and socio-political context; and that it can evoke different

responses and emotions, depending on people’s lived experiences.

Improving inclusion and shifting power to restore relationships have been foundational to many recent organisational change processes at Tearfund. We know that the legacy of colonialism has created an imbalance of power, which means we need to be intentionally aware of our own use of power in order to better walk alongside others and actively guard against the distorting effects of power and hierarchy on relationships. Where there are imbalances of power, those with power (which can manifest itself through location, job title, race, gender, ethnicity, ability, use of language, etc.), need to recognise their privilege and work to open the space for the benefit of others.

In practice, some of the intentional power shifts we are trying to effect are about understanding where power lies and decision-making takes place in order to enable the outworking of being both a global and local organisation. We have set a course so as to move the centre-ground from West-practice to rest-of-world-practice, from UK-based dominance to regional and country ownership, from centralisation to localisation,<sup>8</sup> from importation to indigenisation, from donor to participant, and from extraction and control to communion and friendship. For example, capacity assessment processes used by Tearfund and other INGOs, are rooted in West-practice with little room for contextualisation. This can be contrasted with the Friendship Model and Abundant Africa,<sup>9</sup> both of which were shaped by people in local contexts. Many of these shifts have been underway at Tearfund for many years, and while much work still lies ahead, in the five years since our Jubilee, significant acceleration has taken place. To say that our decolonisation journey has always followed a grand master plan would be misleading and misrepresent the messiness of cultural and attitude change over time. It would be more accurate to characterise it as one of gradual emergence and often

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<sup>6</sup> Strategic enablers contribute to Tearfund being a vibrant, well-connected, global organisation that values diversity, is inclusive of all, supports staff development, and has spirituality and God at the centre. As of 2023, Tearfund’s strategic enablers are: People and Culture, Diversity and Inclusion, Digital and Technology, Strategic Networks and Partnerships, Strategy, Impact and Evidence.

<sup>7</sup> Initiated at the 2016 Global Summit on Community Philanthropy, “Shift the Power” is a growing movement of people challenging the traditional top-down paradigm, ways of working and decision-making within international development aid and philanthropy. The movement calls for new behaviours, mindsets and work approaches that shift power and resources, and promote more equitable and people-led change.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to acknowledge that some, such as Jeroo Billimoria, view “localisation” as an unhelpful term. Billimoria suggests that the term “ecosystem development” be used instead, and in the place of “decolonisation,” she suggests using the term “proximate leaders” (Ainsworth and Byatnal 2022).

<sup>9</sup> The Friendship Model is a highly relational and catalytic approach to movement-building and Abundant Africa is a development process and coalition toward an African restorative economy, one that functions within environmental limits, ensures everyone can meet their basic needs, and prevents unreasonable inequality.

separate decisions and initiatives, including the ones highlighted in this article, coalescing into what has clearly become the journey we are on.

The organisational initiatives listed below and covered in more depth over the remainder of this article, serve as important, if imperfect, examples of how Tearfund has practically tried to shift power and widen inclusion, while also aiming to become more effective as an organisation and more sensitive to those we serve:

- embedding D&I as a powerful organisational enabler,
- transforming organisational leadership with our Leading Tearfund Together (LTT) initiative,
- the International Review (the organisational change process Tearfund underwent from the end of 2017 to 2020 in order to shift power and decision-making away from the UK and towards regions, countries and communities),
- building a board of trustees with significant representation from countries and regions where Tearfund works,
- contextual approaches in agency and allyship, specifically the Asian Friendship Model and Abundant Africa,
- intentionality around inclusive language, translation, and communications practices and policies, and
- localisation of our humanitarian work.

### **Diversity and Inclusion (D&I)**

In 2017, Tearfund embarked on a proactive journey of placing diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and representation at the heart of its organisational enablers and values, as well as shifting power and decision-making away from the UK. It was borne from a recognition that “as a British, Christian organisation, operating globally in a post-colonial context, we needed to consider how we have been shaped by broader historical and political ideologies, and how the legacy of these continues to impact our organisational systems and social norms” (Tearfund 2018a).

Our DNA as a faith-based organisation, including our belief that everyone is created in the image of God, galvanised our resolve to restore relationships and challenge injustice, including that caused by colonial practices and attitudes. Our worldview that the injustice and marginalisation that cause poverty are not God’s plan is foundational to our determination to disrupt racist, exploitative, and unjust practices. Our engagement in a wider conversation about D&I and decolonisation has enabled us to look with fresh insight on our own cultural context to better align and deepen our responses to these evils.

As part of Tearfund’s anti-racism work, we have come to acknowledge that colonialism continues to contribute to inequality, given that “racism manifests in the very structure of international aid” (House of Commons 2022). In 2021, Tearfund renewed its commitment to “deliver programmes in inclusive ways; taking practical steps to shift power and decision-making in regions and countries where we work, and evaluate the philosophy and culture of our work” (Tearfund 2022a). Having D&I as one of our key organisational enablers has allowed it to be championed at multiple levels of the organisation, from the board to teams and individuals. A Tearfund D&I committee, established in 2021 for an initial two years, has also raised the organisational profile of D&I work.

The appointment of a dedicated D&I lead reporting directly to the executive team and also operating as our CEO’s chief of staff, has helped to embed and advance D&I initiatives and culture change across the organisation. This culture change has been supported by regions and groups through group-specific annual diversity and inclusion action plans, regular drop-in sessions, deep-dives on D&I topics, D&I workshops within regions and groups, and a weekly anti-racism conversation. The conversations support staff to explore D&I topics and offer safe spaces for questions, discussion, and collective learning. Key to these plans have been training and empowering a cohort of D&I mobilisers across Tearfund, with a mandate to make space within our team rhythms for hosting D&I conversations.

During the time of the global outcry about racism, after the murder of George Floyd, Tearfund responded with the capability we had at that time. While we had been taking positive steps forward as an organisation prior to this, it enabled us to reflect on our shortcomings. We acknowledged that even though racial and ethnic injustice are key drivers of poverty, we had not done enough in the past to dismantle the systems, policies, and processes that keep systemic racism alive. The legacy of colonialism that contributes to inequality in many of the countries where we work has tainted the experiences of people who live in or have their roots in these places.

We were deeply grateful that we already had a D&I framework embedded within the organisation, because it helped us hold honest and brave conversations at such a sensitive time. Nevertheless, there is much more to do. While the championing of organisational accountability in relation to D&I has progressed well, our efforts to develop metrics for D&I purposes have been hampered by the lack of data on gender, ethnicity, and disability. This depends on the willingness of employees to share this information, and acknowledging that, in some contexts, revealing racial or ethnic data can expose people to risks and even

endanger people's lives. Additionally, as a Christian organisation, Tearfund is acutely aware of the spectrum of Christian views on disability, which can also make disclosure difficult. In order to ensure that we understand who is within our workforce and to help us target interventions, we need data. It helps to identify whether action is needed and can sometimes provide the legal basis necessary to use interventions such as positive action in recruitment to ensure we hire a more diverse workforce. Because we do not want anyone to feel at risk as a result of disclosing diversity data, we must find alternative data-sets and pathways to ensure people are fully represented.

Our intentional engagement with the Black Majority Church<sup>10</sup> has been another important part of our inclusion journey. In the UK context, we made a conscious decision not to be complicit in reproducing past shameful and unjust patterns of separation of faith communities according to race. Engaging with and serving the global church, including the Black Majority Church in the UK, has led to the creation of The Well, in recognition of the powerful encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well which overcame so many of the cultural, racial, and political barriers. This powerful collaboration between Tearfund and Black Majority Churches and Christians of African and Caribbean Heritage has been described by Bishop Joshua NK Banda of Northmead Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAoG) church, Zambia as "a journey that will help us fulfil our vision to see every PAoG church become a centre of transformation" (Tearfund, 2022b). The chair of The Well committee also sits on our board, as part of our UK engagement work, with the aim for Tearfund to be much more reflective of the diversity of God's church across the world.

### **Leading Tearfund Together**

During the Jubilee year, and as Tearfund walked through the International Review (see below), we recognised that the organisation was entering a season of considerable change and adaptation and that this called for significant investment in our global leadership group, representing senior leadership from all geographical regions. The following year, funds were allocated to equip, support, and encourage our global leadership to lead together, on behalf of Tearfund. This programme, named Leading Tearfund Together (LTT), started in 2018 and included core components on leading self, leading team and organisation, and sustaining and embedding change. The vision for this programme continues to encourage and foster a cadre of senior leaders who are

- aspiring to work together and have a "One Tearfund" mindset and approach,
- distinctively Christ-centred and servant-hearted in engagement and relationships,
- focused on aligning work to Tearfund's priorities, and
- playing to each other's strengths and releasing the rest of Tearfund's employees to play to their own strengths.

LTT has been running continuously for five years now, equipping and supporting our leaders and creating a single leadership cohort, with regular training and collaboration time together. LTT has helped foster the understanding that Tearfund is not led from the UK, instead placing an emphasis on leading Tearfund "from where you are." This formed a vital part of our decolonisation journey, because we consciously wanted to shift power away from our UK-based office toward where leadership was based around the world. The result of the leadership development process of these first three cohorts was that it became clear that this group of leaders, the country directors, regional directors and "heads of" should collectively form the global leadership team that was inaugurated at Focus Fortnight in June 2019 by Tearfund's CEO, Nigel Harris. LTT and the formation of the global leadership team, together with the International Review (see below) has formed a vital part of our decolonisation journey as we consciously shift power away from our UK-based office toward leadership based in the countries and regions where we serve.

The first three cohorts of leaders graduated in the autumn of 2019, ensuring that the sense of global unity, leadership skills, confidence, and mandate were honed and ready for the pandemic period that followed. An exercise in "listening to God" formed a part of the final module and led to a significant set of scriptures and prophetic pictures being shared (a boat leaving safe harbour, an orchestra, a tree with deep roots, and a tent spreading wide and strongly pegged) that served to encourage the whole organisation through the early months of the pandemic.

Tearfund has benefited greatly from this investment in its global leadership cohort, fostering a "one Tearfund" approach, a deepening respect and unity across the global leadership team, and growing leadership competence and confidence based as much on personal spiritual formation as on well-regarded leadership theory and practice. Going forward, we will continue to adapt the format to improve greater global inclusivity and participation.

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<sup>10</sup> Black Majority churches in the UK originated in the early twentieth century under the leadership of those who migrated to the country mostly from Africa and the Caribbean. For more information, see Olofinjana 2010.

## **International Review**

A listening exercise conducted by Tearfund's then newly appointed international director led to The International Review (Tearfund 2019), which commenced in 2017 with the aim of transforming Tearfund into an organisation more reflective of its global work, including moving power and decision-making closer to the communities it serves. The specific aims of this major change initiative included:

- creation of a more decentralised, global organisation,
- location of decision-making and resources as close as possible to the communities the organisation serves,
- movement of teams out of the UK into regions, staffed primarily from within the region,
- changed and improved organisational processes, procedures, and systems,
- clarification of decision-making and accountability through a Decision-making and Accountability Framework (DMAF), and
- creation of a set of shared organisational behaviours and characteristics.

Alongside the structural changes brought by the International Review, Tearfund characteristics were developed to help provide a framework for our interactions with each other, support our D&I efforts, and forge a better organisational culture. These characteristics (create space for God and ourselves, learn and grow, include and value each other, work together, communicate bravely, and act with integrity) were worked into various Bible studies, team activities, annual appraisals and other key processes and organisational rhythms.

They are the behaviours we aspire to. They are built on a number of principles and aspirations we believe are critical to our vision and mission, which in turn have helped us maintain the momentum of change processes like the International Review and subsequent corporate initiatives aimed at shifting power. These characteristics continue to be a useful basis for helping us lean into difficult conversations about power and inclusion with grace and openness.

A recent external report concluded that the International Review has indeed helped make Tearfund a more inclusive global organisation, enabling a power shift and bringing decision-making closer to programmes, partners, and communities, as well as increasing our focus, energy, and agility to respond to the needs of those we serve (Maramba 2021). But the job is not yet finished. The report highlights the work that must still be done to reduce organisational complexity and the burden of our processes and

systems, particularly in light of the introduction of additional compliance and risk controls in the wake of The Charities Commission report into the Oxfam safeguarding scandal (Maramba 2021).

A live issue for us, as with many other INGOs, is how we measure impact in ways that encourage inclusion and ownership, and measure complexity in ways that reduce any sense of extraction. We also need to press even further into global representation and inclusion work within our operational structures, given that regional power structures can unintentionally replicate colonial patterns of behaviour. There is an ongoing conversation within Tearfund about how best to achieve mindset change and adaptation of working practices across all parts of the organisation, given the shift in power brought about as a consequence of the International Review.

## **Board of Trustees**

In 2018, when Tearfund appointed its first ever female chair of the board, it also decided significantly to increase representation from countries and regions where we work. As a Christian faith-based INGO, Tearfund recruited people from across the diversity of churches that we serve. The board thus decided that it should be constituted with no fewer than a third females and no fewer than a third from majority-world heritage. The board took this decision as a way to encourage it towards more intentional consideration and recruitment of a range of board members from different backgrounds, cultures, and experience.

Over time, the board has become more representative of the communities and churches we work with, bringing better quality of debate, discussions, and inputs. The board now has one South African national based in Johannesburg, one Rwandan based in Kigali who is also a church pastor, and one Indian trustee based in Chennai. It includes a former refugee; another who was forced to flee his country due to internal violence; another with personal experience of deep poverty. One trustee is a leader from the Elim church network and another from the Redeemed Christian Church of God. The board and executive team formally assess the effectiveness of the board annually, commenting in recent years on the value of the increased diversity and experience on the board; informal comments have also noted that the quality and rigour of debate has increased as a result of the increased range of views and perspectives around the table. A stronger and more energised commitment to D&I is reflected in the board members themselves, offering expertise from finance to theology to marketing, including personal experience of poverty and refugee status, and bringing together voices from three different continents. With board members located across the globe, scheduling board meetings has

not always been easy, but COVID-19 lockdowns accelerated the adoption of online meetings.

Our board members bring a wide range of professional experiences along with very different lived experiences. Having board members allocated to specific working committees (e.g., impact, fundraising, theology) utilises their deep and specific skills to hold Tearfund to account for progress on specific initiatives. Other helpful learnings from the board's experiences over the last four years include:

- the benefits of having “board buddies” who look out for each other on the board, offering informal support and helping build a sense of belonging and trust,
- being open to non-Western approaches of governance, given that governance could look different from a global perspective versus a UK perspective, and
- creating more diverse shortlists when recruiting new board members, with selection panels intentionally considering the value of broad diversity of experience and location in the decisions they make.

Tearfund has greatly benefitted from having a much more diverse and dynamic board and this may offer some insights on initiatives to help further globalise Tearfund's executive team. Improving representation across leadership and decision-making positions can be a slow process, so to achieve greater global representation of leadership groups going forward we are working with our staff council, recruitment team, and hiring managers to see how this can be accelerated.

### **Contextual Approaches in Agency and Allyship**

Tearfund wants to play its part in restoring relationships and disrupting colonial patterns of behaviour. In our work alongside communities and churches, we remain vigilant to the distorting effects of power, and consciously aim to shift power and agency in favour of the communities and churches we serve. In all our work across regions and countries we prayerfully seek God's guidance in how to do this with humility, wisdom, and grace, serving God's church in transformative mission and putting church and community transformation at the heart of what we do. Over time, with the help of our friends and allies, we have developed contextualised approaches aimed at serving the local church from where it finds itself, rather than where Tearfund is at. Contextual and locally-designed approaches include the Friendship Model in Asia and the [Abundant Africa](#) coalition for a restorative, sustainable, and abundant future. The aim of these two approaches, as well as other highly contextualised and locally-designed approaches, guided by our church and

community transformation principles with Biblical theology and holistic change at their core, is to enable the organisation to continue working towards a peaceful and inclusive world with restored relationships at its heart.

**Friendship Model:** The friendship model is the partnership model that Tearfund uses in East & South East Asia—a model that seeks to remove the power relationships inherent within the donor-recipient model. At the heart of the friendship model is a recognition that by virtue of who we are, regardless of our intentions, we could unintentionally wield power over the communities we aim to serve or over the partners we serve with, and that we therefore consciously and continuously need to consider how to shift power. The analogy of a dinner table laid out for guests has been useful to our approach. It is not merely about inviting more people to the table, but laying the table for others to serve themselves, intentionally stepping back from our power and deconstructing the way we do things. This means shifting from funding to befriending, and from a logic of control to a logic of trust, where the trust must be intrinsic because of a belief in the good of the cause, rather than because there is a business case for it. Key to the Friendship Model is considering how conversations are introduced, how they are held, where they are held, who decides what is important, who is responsible for the actioning of decisions, and who monitors progress. This approach helps to build healthy, interdependent relationships instead of “colonial” relationships in which things are done for and to people rather than with people. Under the friendship model, Tearfund's partners set the agenda, deciding what conversations should occur and how, where meetings are held, who is invited, and so forth. When Tearfund is invited to the table, it comes as a participant. Tearfund's primary role is to listen—not as a donor coming to pay for what has already been decided, but as a friend, offering suggestions as appropriate, but on the understanding that these can be accepted or rejected by partners.

This also requires recalibration of the balance between storytelling and reporting, being mindful of fulfilling due diligence requirements without overburdening communities and churches. This means delighting in sharing and hearing stories as friends on a journey together, instead of being “monitored and evaluated.” The friendship model offers a post-development, post-colonial foundation for developing healthy, reciprocal relationships with everyone, recognising that we are all made in the image of God. It is about shaping each other, learning from each other, and connecting with each other to experience the fullness of life.

**Abundant Africa:** Abundant Africa is an advocacy movement that developed out of Tearfund's church and community transformation work for a future as envisaged by people living in countries across Africa. An African-centric and African-designed approach, it emerged from a Tearfund devotional space to counter the often pessimistic or saviourist narratives that dominate so much of the international press coverage about Africa. The Abundant Africa vision was developed as a counter-narrative to what some recognise as colonial framing by taking inspiration from black consciousness and radical black philosopher-leaders such as Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon.

During the emergence of the vision for an Abundant Africa, African theologians convened by Tearfund proposed an approach centred around the creation narrative with God and humankind working together, placing agency within the hands of the oppressed and not the oppressor. As a continent and people, the vision is for Africa and African people to reclaim their agency as people made in the image of God in a way that resonates with the next generation.<sup>11</sup> It embeds political thinking, identity, theology, discipleship, and movement building into an authentically African narrative.

### Language and Translation

Language and power are related. The languages we use, and the ways we use them, can create or perpetuate harmful power dynamics and can determine whether people feel included or excluded. Feelings of exclusion can arise, for example, when interpretation is not offered at corporate communications events to cater for people whose first, second, or third language is not English. Recognising the potential for language to cause harm, Tearfund has developed guidelines to help ensure that the organisation's written and verbal communications are respectful and do not negatively affect people's identity, rights, or dignity. This includes the use of clear, accessible language and the avoidance of outdated terms and harmful stereotypes. This approach is often referred to in INGO circles as the "decolonisation" of language.

Tearfund has also recently approved a language and translation policy that supports the decolonisation of language as well as other inclusive linguistic practices. These include:

- increased emphasis on languages other than English, including growing the number of resources that are written and developed in other languages,
- proportionate investment in translation and interpretation to enhance both internal and external communications, and
- regular assessment of Tearfund's language and communication needs as the organisation becomes increasingly linguistically diverse.

Speaking about the language policy in her recent book, academic and researcher Wine Tesseur (2022, 40) notes, "Tearfund's initiative indicates a potentially significant shift towards a more overt consideration of the link between language and inclusion, which positions Tearfund as a leading example in the INGO sector."

Challenges remain in relation to how best to fund the cost of translation and interpretation as demand for these services rises across the organisation. But when translation is viewed through a D&I lens, what might initially seem like cost overheads become investments in inclusivity.

### Humanitarian Work

Tearfund's humanitarian teams engaged with decolonisation earlier than other parts of the organisation, on account of the ongoing debate within the sector about the nexus between development and emergency response, and how best to protect and support people when conflict and crisis threaten to overwhelm national capacity and resources. It is important to note that narratives around "capacity building" can either uphold colonial logics or be intentionally decolonial themselves; it is the latter that we strive for.<sup>12</sup>

For Tearfund, like many other agencies that responded to the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, events there became a turning point in realising the extent to which the collective humanitarian response system trampled on national capacity, undermined local agency, and missed opportunities to accompany local partners. Even though colonisation was not the primary focus of the analysis of the experiences in Haiti, it is clear that if a decolonisation lens had been applied to the Haitian humanitarian intervention, it could have made a huge difference to the tone, quality, and effectiveness of the response. It is generally agreed that the 2010 Haiti earthquake response lacked accountability, sensitivity, and a

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<sup>11</sup> As part of decolonisation discussions around the Abundant Africa Report (2021), which was spearheaded by Miles Giljam, different regional nuances emerged that were important for the framing of the report and subsequent movement-building initiatives.

<sup>12</sup> Editors' note: For more on capacity building, see the contribution by Toluwanimi Jaiyebo-Okoro in this issue.



localisation focus on the part of donors and responders. These lessons, in addition to various reports about subsequent missed opportunities in Pakistan, South Sudan, and Nepal, provided a strong impetus for the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit enshrining localisation in its outcomes (Zadeh-Cummings 2022), and the subsequent Charter for Change<sup>13</sup> and The Grand Bargain,<sup>14</sup> both of which are commitments to transform the way the humanitarian sector operates, and both of which Tearfund has signed up to.

Coinciding with the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, Tearfund began work as part of the START Network<sup>15</sup> to “create systems change within the humanitarian system” through a series of “shifting the power” projects. These initiatives aimed to improve the humanitarian architecture by building the capacity of local counterparts according to global standards, using self-assessment and locally owned capacity frameworks for local NGOs. Many of the innovative programmes that Start Network piloted helped push the boundaries of paradigm change. The Shifting the Power project continually built on national partners’ voices, on their choices and how they wanted to strengthen their capacity against their own strategic goal to be national responders. This contrasted greatly to what international aid responders perceived to be the shortcomings of national actors, often viewed through sub-contracts where international aid agencies benchmarked a partner’s performance against a series of standards designed by international actors.

Tearfund chose to continue shifting the power through a process called Disaster Management Capacity Assessment (DMCA). Investing in national capacity through local and regional staff members was always a strategic goal, but it required a systematic approach. The establishment of a Capacity Strengthening Fund was a step towards this. The internal fund provides resourcing and funding for DMCA in countries where Tearfund works, with a view to rolling it out across all of these countries by 2025. Since the Haiti earthquake in 2010, Tearfund had already embarked on a trajectory away from expat-heavy disaster response teams towards integration of

development, resilience, and response at the most local levels possible.

Accelerating the shift towards a lean Humanitarian Support Team (HST) with a focus on accompaniment was difficult and painful for both the HST and regional teams,<sup>16</sup> and some of the steepest learning and adaptation had to occur while simultaneously responding to large-scale disasters such as Cyclone Idai.<sup>17</sup> The most challenging changes relate to the requirement for regional teams to build up local humanitarian capacity in preparation for crises, given the pressing weight of development priorities, whilst the global HST team’s limited involvement in the later phases of the humanitarian response cycle at times proved disheartening to individuals who had to step back from parts of the disaster response cycle they were previously accustomed to leading.

Over time, teams and staff members have settled into new ways of working. In 2019 the Resilience Unit merged with the Humanitarian Support Team to form the Humanitarian and Resilience team (HaRT) to drive a greater focus on readiness and local resilience in the face of increasing severity and frequency of crises. An increasing requirement is for responders and resilience workers to be based as locally as possible. This trajectory was already set in motion with the Inter-Asia Ministerial conference ASEAN declaration “by Asia for Asia” in 2018, allowing only ASEAN passport holders to be responders during the Sulawesi tsunami. Tearfund’s Humanitarian and Resilience team has actively sought to work within the spirit of this declaration, increasingly shifting from internationally pooled response teams towards accompanying national responders where possible. This approach was vindicated during the Covid lockdowns, when borders were shut, and only local and national assistance was available to communities.

Tearfund recognises the importance of deconstructing stereotypical Western representations of “aid recipients” and is actively engaged in correcting this through mindful use of images and language. Some in the aid sector have suggested shifting from “humanitarian aid” toward a “reparations” movement to redress colonial wounds and structural consequences

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://charter4change.org>.

<sup>14</sup> See <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/content/grand-bargain-hosted-iasc>.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://startnetwork.org/about>.

<sup>16</sup> Accompaniment is generally taken to mean working side-by-side with local communities in a humble attitude of learning. In the humanitarian context, it means moving away from directly responding, to working with or alongside our partners to enable them to directly respond. It also involves sharing understanding of international humanitarian aid structures and standards, and supporting partners to apply directly for funding themselves. The accompaniment model also formalises roles that provide technical support, such as those that support local partners to develop their own capacity strengthening plans funded by Tearfund.

<sup>17</sup> Cyclone Idai was a devastating cyclone that hit Mozambique in March 2019.

such as inequality, injustice, poverty, and conflict. These are all issues we continue to grapple with at Tearfund.

Tearfund continues to move away from globally directed work in favour of contextually determined goals and priorities. The increased remit for nationalised country offices to fundraise locally could inadvertently present a dilemma in the humanitarian sphere. Establishing national offices could in theory displace home-grown organisations, or unintentionally reduce the funding and resource pool for national partners. We remain mindful about reverting to “donor response” mode during times of crisis, instead championing, accompanying, and intentionally making space for national actors to access their own humanitarian funding as far as possible. We still need to fine-tune which functions should be held globally, regionally, and locally, especially given the need for long-term capacity. We have completed our country level emergency response guidelines or procedures and are launching a framework for achieving best quality preparedness and response practice whilst building in locally led adaptability.

Our goal is ultimately to localise all response capacity, recognising that given the relatively small size of our organisation we will need to maximise advocacy and influencing opportunities and alliances to strengthen disaster and crisis response capacity, legalisation, and prioritisation. These alliances increasingly include members of the Tearfund family, the Integral Alliance, and the START network, as well as other civil society organisations and governments. Going forward, Tearfund remains committed to localisation and national response capacity as a priority,<sup>18</sup> but the precise path our decolonised journey will take within the humanitarian response system is not yet certain.

## Conclusion

If “decolonisation is understood as to release what was taken over” (Sarmiento 2022), we know there is still much to restore and to make right, requiring continuous re-imagining, renewal, and restoration. Colonisation destroyed identities for the sake of empire—artificially elevating some as superior whilst treating others as inferior. Repenting now of this destruction requires us to work toward the restoration of identity, and not only those of others, but also our own internal identities as individuals and who we are and what we do as Tearfund.

Since our Jubilee year, so much has happened within Tearfund to improve inclusion, globalise our culture, and shift power. After fifty years of service, we were able to pause and reflect on how we wanted to conduct ourselves in future years, including how best to grapple with our collective colonial legacy. Looking back, our Jubilee period was indeed a key turning point, where as an organisation we allowed the pain of that legacy to emerge through honest conversations within and across teams, prayers, and reflection globally. Only through such a process would people feel ready to be vulnerable and share with others how they felt in relation to Tearfund as an organisation, both individually and collectively.

During our Jubilee year, a spiritual shift happened as we prayed together across the globe, possibly unwittingly achieving a spiritual milestone during our decolonisation journey, with positive reverberations that we could not possibly foresee at that point. It seems God in his grace used our Jubilee process to start a renewal process amongst us. Looking back, the path Tearfund chose feels like an example of Jubilee in action, where those with power voluntarily agree to reset the power relationships.<sup>19</sup> Our Jubilee was a time of release, restitution, and relationship-building, following which rest was needed. It thus provided the impetus for Tearfund establishing organisational sabbath days to allow for periodic reflection and to create space for true vulnerability and healing, towards a new Tearfund identity to deliver our vision.<sup>20</sup>

Despite significant progress in our hearts, minds, and behaviours towards a globally inclusive culture and workplace with accompanying power shifts well underway, Tearfund’s decolonisation journey is by no means complete. We still need to reduce the complexity of our systems and processes as we transition from being a donor toward becoming an invited friend and companion. Further, we operate within a system that currently demands systems of reporting in ways that this journey may lead us to question, but we cannot alone remove those demands or fail to comply with them—decolonised systems of accountability remain an ongoing challenge for the sector as a whole. Overall, we still have much healing and restoration to embrace and work toward, with many more practical obstacles to overcome.

Despite inevitable bumps in the road, we believe in the benefits of becoming a truly inclusive, diverse, and global organisation. We continue to keep an open mind as to what Tearfund will look like in decades to come,

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<sup>18</sup> This is in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030), adopted by the UN member states in 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Miles Giljam, Personal notes, Tearfund Staff Conference, June 2017.

<sup>20</sup> A sabbath day is a calendar day when all staff stop work in order to pray and reflect together.

but we remain confident in our role supporting, serving, and convening the global church, even as our decolonisation journey accelerates.

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