
Decolonizing Data and Recovering the Person in Christian Relief and Development Organizations¹

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The purpose of this paper is to prompt Western Christian organizations—funded and led by people whose histories are intertwined with colonialism—to examine the impact of their “gaze” on people in the Majority World. Today, because of the vast scale of the Christian humanitarian and relief industry, Christ-centered development assistance must avoid perpetuating entrenched asymmetries of power and authoritative knowledge production between the Global North and Global South. To safeguard the rights of those living in poverty requires a conscious effort to decolonize Christian development data collection by recognizing the dangerous potential for Western Christian organizations to impose inequitable measures of data extraction and acquisition on the Global South.

Introduction

On the 16th of April 1917, Mahatma Gandhi arrived in Champaran in North Bihar at the foothills of the Himalayan mountains. He came to investigate reports by Indian sharecroppers who accused the British landlords of extorting large sums of money and forcing them to grow indigo in lieu of other more profitable crops. Gandhi decided to gather data to prove that the tenants were being oppressed by the British planters. In a few weeks, Gandhi and teams of volunteers visited twenty-eight hundred villages and collected over eight thousand statements from indigent indigo farmers. Gandhi was ordered to leave Champaran, but he refused and was imprisoned by the British. Hearing his friend was in prison, Anglican clergyman Charles F. Andrews offered to help. Gandhi kindly refused the offer, saying that it was up to Indians to learn to be self-reliant and to fight for their freedom.

Armed with a crushing mountain of evidence of the abuse of Indian tenants by British indigo planters, Gandhi was able to force the colonial government of Bihar to introduce the Champaran Agrarian Bill into the Bihar Legislative Council on November 29, 1917. The bill abolished the oppressive tenancy system, and the farmers were free to plant whatever crops they

deemed most profitable. The bill also protected farmers from any litigation from the powerful colonial planters associations.

Mahatma Gandhi realized that data was an indispensable means of empowering those living in poverty to solve their problems. Gandhi also realized that external engagement must take the form of accompaniment of local actors as they take the lead in dealing with their oppression and deprivations. Ahead of his time, Gandhi recognized the positionality of the Indian researchers. While the Englishman Charles Andrews might have enhanced the credibility of the Indian team with the British authorities, Gandhi wanted the Indians to persuade the authorities to abolish the tenancy system through their own efforts and with their own data.

The purpose of this essay is to explore whether the methods and modalities of amassing knowledge and personal data employed to serve the growing needs of the rapidly expanding Christian relief and development industry in the Global North carry the risk of perpetuating asymmetrical power structures and even reinscribing coloniality in the Global South (Corrigan, McAlister, and Schäfer 2022). I suggest that there is a latent risk that some Christian relief and development organizations will—borrowing the analysis of Catholic

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development economist Denis Goulet—behave like “one-eyed giants,” insofar as they may prescribe “superior” technical, efficient, and even “colonial” methods of data collection that ignore people’s felt needs and perceptions and “act *as if* man could live by bread alone, *as if* human destiny could be stripped to its material dimensions alone” (Goulet 1980, 481). However, I fully acknowledge that further fine-grained empirical research would be required to test and verify the precise extent to which this latent danger is being realized. Finally, I illustrate how participatory action methods might be useful, portable, and accessible tools of representation and analysis that have the potential to counter the risks associated with more traditional research approaches. Drawing on some of my research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) and utilizing the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methodology, I will explore the value and suitability of participatory methods to inform a genuine conversation about decolonization and data colonialism and, ultimately, to protect the dignity of those individuals and communities being studied.

I hope to prompt Western Christian organizations—funded and led by people whose histories are so intertwined with colonialism—to examine the impact of their “gaze” on people in the Majority World. Today, because of the vast scale of the Christian humanitarian and relief industry, Christ-centered development assistance must avoid perpetuating entrenched asymmetries of power and authoritative knowledge production between the Global North and Global South. To safeguard the rights of those living in poverty requires a conscious effort to decolonize Christian development data collection by recognizing the dangerous potential for Western Christian organizations to impose inequitable measures of data extraction and acquisition on the Global South.

Power and structural inequities operate in Christian development institutions but are rarely discussed. If we are to decolonize data collection, we need to raise certain questions. First, why do certain individuals and associations become recognized as experts in Christian data collection, including designing and implementing Christ-centered monitoring and evaluation frameworks? Do these differences arise because Northern institutions have genuine expertise, or are they due to more complex issues such as the trust of Western donors, Western notions of “standards of excellence,” or memberships in networks that are based in the West? Second, the exercise of power, including the quantification and commodification of data, including very personal data of individuals in the Majority World, raises issues about the legitimacy and accountability of Western Christian institutions. How and on what basis do Christian institutions in the North

acquire the right to exert this power? Is it enough that they are motivated by a Christ-centered vision of human well-being? Or do we need to develop additional criteria around processes of data collection in the Majority World? Third, how do we hold those who exert power in data collection processes accountable, particularly if they are the ones who control the sources of funding?

A cautionary remark is worth making at this preliminary stage. I adopt a critical point of view about the data collection methods of Christian organizations in the Majority World primarily because I consider their work to be too important and too valuable—at least in principle — to be jeopardized by a system of data appropriation and utilization that disregards and underestimates the complexity of their task. Therefore, to reiterate, my analysis is designed to provoke self-critical reflection and to encourage Christian practitioners in the Majority World to examine their work carefully and deliberately and in the light of a rich and robust Christian vision of the dignity of the human person, so that Christ-centered development and humanitarian efforts can remain viable and successful on their own distinctive terms.

The Rise of Evangelical Humanitarianism and Data Gathering

In the 1960s and 1970s, as evangelical humanitarian organizations such as World Vision went mainstream and actively expanded their work in hard-to-reach areas of the world like Ethiopia and Somalia, they rapidly professionalized and were able to compete for funds with secular development agencies. By the time the 1980s rolled around, the number of evangelical relief and development agencies not only outnumbered missions but also began to catch up with secular humanitarian agencies in size and reach (King 2012, 936). The success of evangelical relief and development agencies in accessing American government funds and attracting media attention worried some leaders like Ron Sider who urged evangelicals to live simply and support social issues (Sider 1977). While Sider encouraged this turn to development, he worried that some evangelicals might not fully understand the dangers of secular development policies and programs. Sider warned that “it makes no sense for Christian development agencies to take their basic assumption on the nature of development from secular sources like the United Nations, secular government in developed or developing nations, or private secular development agencies” (as quoted in King 2012, 940).

Things came to a head at the *Consultation on the Church in Response to Human Need* held in Wheaton, Illinois in 1983, which was attended by American evangelicals such as Ron Sider and Global South

evangelicals such as Vinay Samuel, Samuel Escobar, and Rene Padilla. The framers of the “Wheaton Statement” devote an entire section to “Christian Aid Agencies and Transformation.” The statement mentions that “the plight of the poor is often exploited to meet donor needs and expectations.” Furthermore, the Wheaton declaration goes on to state that imposing Western management systems on local communities arises because most organizations assume “that Western planning and control systems are the only ones that can ensure accountability” (“Social Transformation” 1984, 27).

Indeed, as the new generation of large-scale Christian relief and development organizations grew in size and popularity, their need for reliable data to measure their results grew alongside an increase in their funding, including a large influx of private donations.²

To manage and organize the large-scale development programs now in place across the globe, it became necessary to collect reliable and objective data—on the model of Western social science—to demonstrate to donors and the relief organizations themselves that their efforts were making an impact (Wuthnow 2009). Yet certain forms of data risked flattening the complexity of lived Christianity in the Global South to limited, but measurable, Western-centric categories.

For example, in his study of Satnami women in India, Chad Bauman finds that in the mostly agricultural community he researched, women generally worked alongside men in the fields. Upon conversion, however, Satnami-Christian women discarded their traditional fieldwork, confined their activities to within the home, and embraced behaviors consonant with what Western missionaries regarded as “respectable” womanhood and pious femininity. Furthermore, Bauman notes that following missionary ideals of “propriety and restraint,” elaborate Satnami-Christian weddings were stripped down to short Western-style ceremonies in the church (Bauman 2008; Kent 2004).

While this particular example is drawn from historical accounts of Western missionaries operating in India in the mid-twentieth century, the challenge for Northern Christian institutions to understand the complexity of context and culture in their operations remains critically important. Western-based non-government organizations (NGOs) often do the irreplaceable work of nation-states, Christian foundations, and communities. Their work, as Erica Bornstein discovered with World Vision’s Child Sponsorship in Zimbabwe, is a “liberatory force” that changes lives. But it may also “disrupt relationships of

belonging,” as well as magnify and reinforce layers of economic disparity between groups of people in the same local context (2005, 171,195).

In India and in other parts of the Global South, indigenous economic, religious, and social structures were sometimes treated as suspect phenomena to be judged and ultimately transformed in accordance with Northern Christian standards. These standards became the accepted norms for understanding social, economic, and religious life in the South. Women in the Global South, who may not exhibit the kind of feminist power, agency, and confidence of Northern women, may be regarded as “oppressed” or “subjugated.” (Miles 2006, Mahmood 2001). The colonial move is evident here as individuals in the North rise to become the subjects and saviors—in part through acquiring authority and mastery through processes of data gathering—while individuals in the South remain helpless and downtrodden as the debilitated objects and the grateful recipients of Northern benevolence.

Coloniality and the Growth of a Christian Relief and Development Industry

Technical approaches that were part and parcel of prevailing paradigms of modernity and modernization were increasingly adopted by Christian relief and development agencies, and ironically caused them to have a limited and less holistic understanding of development often contrary to their own Christian assumptions (Bornstein 2005).

During the United Nations Decade of Development in the 1960s and even earlier, in the forties and fifties, a group of Catholic scholars led by French Catholic priest Father Louis Joseph Lebreton strongly criticized the one-size-fits-all modernization approach being advocated by the UN and by its partners. This approach, argued Lebreton, simply reduces economic development to increasing consumption and production and is insufficient and ineffective (Culebro Juárez and Gasper 2021). Development for Lebreton is more human and more developed when people are called not just to “have more” but to “be more,” both spiritually and materially. Inspired by Lebreton, his student and pioneer development ethicist Denis Goulet maintained that there can be “authentic development” only when there is a “societal openness to the deepest levels of mystery and transcendence,” and when this yearning for mystery and transcendence is recognized and satisfied (1974, 41).

Unfortunately, such a broad understanding of authentic development is not shared by most in the

² In the late 1990s, World Vision’s President Robert Seiple said that his organization was “the largest privately funded relief-and-development agency in the world” (Seiple 1998).

secular and even some in the Christian development community. As Goulet observes, the issue is the premium frequently placed on the search for technical efficiency and sophistication in the development industry. Goulet notes, as mentioned above, that “technical experts are often one-eyed giants because they come convinced that, somehow or other, they know what is good for people, and they have the answers” (Goulet 1990). “One-eyed giants” might include highly trained experts, including those from the Global North and those who may belong to the Global South, but who are trained in institutions dominated by Northern ideas, practices, and methods and thus operate as outsiders. The imagery of a one-eyed giant suggests that certain types of “superior” or technical approaches to development may in reality be myopic, limited, and constrained in their understanding of development because they lack an “authentic” and fuller understanding of the economic, social, and spiritual needs and perceptions of the people they profess to help.

Widespread recognition of “desecularization” and the global resurgence of religion in the late 1990s saw global development institutions such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) begin to work more deliberately and closely with large-scale religious institutions (Tomalin 2018, 10). The intersection of religion and poverty, particularly in the early 2000s and following the tragedies of 9/11, further increased partnerships between secular Global North development donors and institutions and faith-based relief and development agencies across the globe (Tomalin 2018). To compete for government funds and to professionalize operations, some large Christian development institutions hired evaluation professionals and began developing technically sophisticated data-gathering methods and frameworks to measure program effectiveness and sustainable impact (Wuthnow, 2009).

The secular development industry soon realized that Christian institutions often have personnel with deep historical roots in the communities they are seeking to reach and could gather vital granular data at the local level. Global North Christian development institutions became key partners with global development institutions in the extraction and appropriation of information from a variety of sources, including from vulnerable and marginalized communities on sensitive topics such as condom usage for HIV/AIDS prevention, contraception, and domestic violence (Corrigan, McAlister, and Schäfer 2022).

In these situations, as in so many others, Western Christian relief and development agencies, particularly international faith-based organizations (FBOs) such as Tearfund and World Vision, serve as intermediaries between local Christian communities, and the secular development industry (Bornstein 2005, Wuthnow 2009). Since Western Christian institutions have a history and experience of working with local Christian communities, they play a key role in collecting and “translating” local data and knowledge, including indigenous customs and values, for the global development industry. These power issues that affect development data collection need to enlist faithful Christians to take deliberate action to decolonize data gathering. For example, restoring dignity and ownership to the Global South requires donors and leaders to reduce the gap between those who voice their views about the programs they want and the actual decision-makers.

Christian Relief and Development Organizations as “Value-Bearers, Value-Promoters, and Value-Destroyers”

Data-gathering frameworks and technologies are not value-neutral. By employing certain data-gathering methods, Christian institutions convey a powerful bias favoring a certain form of rationality, a conception of “the good life,” and a particular approach to power and authority. For example, Birdsall and Beaman note that the quantitative approach employed by the Pew Reports on religious harassment within and between countries obscures the complexity of a variety of religious traditions and does not reflect the lived reality of people of faith. Yet the data from Pew are often quoted and utilized by religious freedom organizations, including Western-based Christian institutions advocating for religious freedom in the Global South (Birdsall and Beaman 2020). Some data collection methods may also favor particular narratives about individual autonomy, faith, sexuality, and even the role of the market that may be at odds with those living in the Majority World.

A case in point are the traditional Western social-scientific surveys and questionnaires administered to respondents tend to presuppose that those surveyed function and act as—and indeed are—independent and unencumbered individual agents. But this methodological and epistemological premise may be completely out of step with a social reality prevailing in much of the Global South, in which individuals are embedded in, and act as part of, larger communitarian wholes, whether of family, clan, tribe, or faith. Goulet thus maintains that the very means or the processes by which data are collected, processed, and analyzed are themselves “value bearers, value promoters, and value destroyers” (Goulet 1990). By designing certain types of

evaluation approaches or proposing Western-centric frameworks of accountability and learning, Christian technicians confer values, negative or positive, on various forms of social customs, religious beliefs, and cultural practices in the Majority World—for example, in favor of individualism and against familism, tribalism, and communitarianism.

While not explicit in their condemnation, it is possible that some Northern/Western Christian agencies may implicitly judge certain cultural, religious, and tribal resources to be inferior, backward, and inimical to development, perhaps because they do not fit with modern Western cultural assumptions. Behavioral economists have written about the frustrating reality that poor farmers in the Global South frequently fail to make certain strategic and profitable investments even when the likely returns are high (Tanguy, et al. 2014). There is no denying that certain attitudes and behaviors associated with apathy and helplessness do exist among lower-income communities in the Global South (Ibid.). The relevant question, however, is how much such attitudes and behaviors reflect “cultural patterns” that need to be reformed, or are a reflection of economic and structural conditions. A further question is whether Northern Christian relief and development agencies have any criteria or guiding principles to help them critique their own cultural assumptions and value judgments, and how these assumptions and value judgments inform their own approaches to data and knowledge generation in the Global South.

Criteria that might be helpful in guiding Christian relief and development organizations may be drawn from natural law theory. Thomas Aquinas, who lived between 1224 and 1274, is generally regarded as the pre-eminent theorist of natural law. Although Aquinas lived and wrote in Europe, his writings leave no “palpable trace” of the “dealings of his era’s kings, popes, and emperors” (Finnis 1998, 3). Thomas Aquinas, it seems, was “engaged in a vast trans-temporal conversation” and thus was not confined to his time, but instead transcended his time (Ibid., 4). His writings on natural law were informed by serious reflection and study of various masters of inquiry including scholars of eleventh-century Persia and twelfth-century Islamic Spain (Ibid.).

Natural law refers to a set of principles or precepts that are derived from eternal or divine law but are accessible to common human reason and are used to order human life and human community (Finnis 1998). For Aquinas, the first principle that ties together the many principles of natural law is “good is to be done and pursued and bad is to be avoided” (Ibid., 80). With natural law as a possible guiding principle in mind, I suggest that practices that aim toward universal goods of human life—which include family, religious practice,

community life, protection of the weak and vulnerable, knowledge, and so forth—are the ones to be valued, affirmed, promoted, and sustained in relief and development work as in all domains of human enterprise.

The precepts of natural law could help Western-based Christian development, relief, and humanitarian agencies not to impose ad hoc, individualistic, or technocratic criteria that are specific to the West, or perhaps point them toward Christian approaches that allow for Christian beliefs and practices but critique harmful local practices. Problematic local practices that indeed deserve legitimate critique may include child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), the caste system, witchcraft, and so on. In the same way, Christian development agencies may adopt approaches to data collection that meet the criterion of reinforcing the basic goods of human life, human dignity, authenticity and integrity, and rational human agency (or the good of “practical reasonableness”) as outlined in Aquinas’s theory of natural law. The following list of questions that each organization should ask itself is in no way exhaustive, but seeks to identify certain aspects and risks of colonizing approaches to data collection, as well as facets of decolonizing approaches that could be adopted by Christian relief and development agencies:

- How do Northern Christian development and relief agencies avoid predatory extractive practices of data collection and abstract digitized quantification of data? The goal here is to protect the God-given dignity of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of the human family through the practice of informed consent so that they are treated not as mere objects but as full human persons—i.e., human subjects possessing agency and inherent worth as ends in themselves. In cases of extreme vulnerability and diminished autonomy such as in refugee camps, individuals need to be protected so that data collection is not seen as a transaction through which vital services are provided if and only if consent is obtained.
- How do Northern-led Christian data-gathering practices avoid a paternalist framing of their efforts as the only ones who know best because they happen to have the resources and skills to engage in systematic data collection and analysis? Capacity building and strengthening are fraught with colonial overtones where Northern institutions are full of ideas about how to “fix” Global South problems. While capacity strengthening in the Global South is key to greater ownership and

control of data collection, access to Western foundations and funding, political influence, and power are structural issues that capacity strengthening alone cannot remedy. Consider the onerous accounting and paperwork needed to access a grant from USAID or from foundations like the John Templeton Foundation.³ Decolonizing data collection needs to consider the structural inequities inherent in grant-making institutions in the West. In doing so, Christ-centered data gathering could effectively promote the good of justice when institutions and individuals in the Global South have access to a variety of resources they need for their flourishing and the flourishing of their communities.

- How does the data collection of Northern Christian agencies actively protect freedom of religion, including the freedom to convert, even if the individual chooses to practice a religion whose beliefs are contrary to the Christian gospel? Christian development agencies are called to respect human dignity by giving people the freedom to practice the religion most in accord with their own judgments of conscience. Natural law maintains that religion—understood as the attempt to achieve harmony with whatever transcendent source of meaning and reality there might be—is a basic, universal good and should be protected and promoted as such.
- How do data generation practices of Western-based Christian development agencies address the methodological assumptions and methods that perpetuate unequal power dynamics and may be regarded as domineering, technocratic, and extractive? The section in this paper that could help address these issues is the example provided below of participatory research conducted among Dalit communities in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research illustrates the need to provide individuals with the room to voice their perspectives, their experiences, their commitments, and their culture. The methods of data collection need to be flexible and open-ended. By providing

non-textual methods such as the “River of Life” (explained below), individuals have accessible and versatile tools to talk about their experiences. Methods that provide an enabling environment with the tools and the voice to provide the data that organization needs to monitor programs and at the same time articulate their concerns collectively encourage the inclusive and active participation of those living in poverty.

- How can the process of data collection by Christian individuals and organizations foster community, build friendships, and appropriately respect and strengthen marriage and family life? Data collection methods that seek precise measurement and scientific rigor may categorize individuals as “oppressed,” “victims,” or “backward.” Data collection methods may also use terms such as “observed,” “underdeveloped,” or “foreign culture,” which create distance and underlie agendas to justify the domination of one group of people over another. For Aquinas, friendship, marital communion, and family life are basic human goods. Human beings were created by God to live in community and in fellowship with one another. Practices of data generation that enable participants to “trade places” could reduce the distance between the data gatherer and the program participant. This in turn could foster respect and build friendship between very different groups of people. Understanding one’s positionality may help forge stronger connections between Northern data gatherers and Southern program participants. Individual-level relationship-building may be a critical step toward long-term structural changes.
- How do Christian institutions become aware of and come to terms with the power manifested in different aspects of data collection? In some cases, data generation, including the planning and implementation of data collection, in Christian relief and development organizations, may be unidirectional from the Northern headquarters to the Southern program offices.

³ To learn more about The Templeton World Charity Foundation Human Flourishing Project see https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_www.templeton.org_&d=DwIFaQ&c=4rZ6NPIETe-LE5i2KBR4rw&r=V7SPit7SKrWs5OnskXKnH0rPjLUKfo9HA-Y3VmuCbXg&m=oafG7a5TjLqVHcPc22bSP8oAAAdPnzXjabtD56OelW7usV58BplPCau6xC2kHNzB&s=nzIxjA2C583rmvalLeitO5j4Sq4Afp-JxM6UdeNRSU&e=

It is important to recognize, for example, that certain forms of data gathering, such as large-scale, impersonal digital surveys to measure maternal mortality or randomized controlled trials to measure the impact of cash incentives among poor farmers, entangle the institution in the coloniality of power and impact the kinds of knowledge that is produced. Positionality refers to how individuals and institutions are perceived in the setting in which they undertake research. A decolonized data collection infrastructure recognizes the politics of knowledge generation in relation to the voice, credibility, and validity of data. Western-based Christian development and humanitarian institutions gathering data in the Global South need to be mindful of positionality, power dynamics, relations, and perceptions of those living in poverty.

Combining a comprehensive Christian vision of the human person and human dignity and of the goods that truly fulfill the human person with the imperative to collect good, measurable, data for relief and development programs is extremely challenging. The process requires paying close attention to the immense and legitimate cultural diversity inherent in the contexts in which Christian relief and development organizations operate, while allowing the process to be guided and shaped by Christ-centered values and virtues.

Decolonizing Funding for Data Collection in Christian Relief and Development

One major challenge we face in the Majority World is that most of the funding for development programs, including research and capacity building, comes from Western governments, Western foundations, or private individuals living in the West. Thus, the process of translating development data may often occur within the structure of Western cultural assumptions and Western power dynamics. Consider an outcome evaluation from the early twenties for a large Christian humanitarian and relief agency headquartered in the United States.⁴ I was the lead evaluator for this end-line evaluation that assessed the impact of a biblically based holistic approach to development being implemented across the globe. The approach was designed to overcome apathy and hopelessness, and drew heavily on biblical teachings, particularly from the gospel.

US-based managers and local staff were keen to harness biblically based principles to eliminate the destructive hold of witchcraft on the lives of program participants. Rooted in Christian teachings that human beings are made in the image of God, they taught participants that they are determined neither by fate nor by unknown evil forces, but are instead free to flourish—and free to choose available pathways to flourishing—because that is God’s intention for them and their families. But the Western-trained program leaders did not stop there. They went on to explain to program participants that certain traditional cultural practices, such as protecting the Baobab tree (common in Senegal), were evil and should be stopped if they wished to flourish.

In the context of the Global North and Global South balance of power, particularly financial power in the form of grants and aid, discussions that disparage certain aspects of culture risk reinforcing Western cultural imperialism and sustaining a false narrative about the superiority of Western Christian culture. Furthermore, once established, these categories of “backward,” “undeveloped,” and “illiterate” may encourage a colonial discourse that defines and perpetuates power imbalances between Global North Christian institutions and Global South individuals.

One of the main thrusts of this Christian organization’s biblical approach to fighting poverty is to engage and challenge deep-seated cultural constraints on economic development and spiritual uplift. In fact, it is valuable and indeed essential to recognize that certain cultural practices can be harmful to human fulfillment and thereby inhibit authentic development. Elsewhere I have written about the developmental constraints imposed by the caste system on the lives of Dalit men and women in India (Shah 2021). Even so, to de-Westernize and decolonize research approaches and data gathering, Christian organizations should not start from a default posture of hostility or skepticism towards traditional cultures and particular cultural practices. They should recognize that more often than not there is value in protecting and preserving cultural values and traditions, such as those aspects of culture that support marriage and marital stability, family life, and domestic harmony. Therefore, to begin a conversation about decolonizing development data collection in the Global South, Christian organizations should critically inquire whether it is culture that blocks authentic development in a given instance, the effect of prevailing economic systems and structures, the way a particular development scheme may have been designed and implemented, or all of the above. The design and implementation of a development scheme

⁴ Note that this is a sensitive internal evaluation that cannot be made public due to the impact it might have on the organisation’s work in some countries of the Global South.

may fail (or may not fully succeed) precisely insofar as it *lacks* a proper respect for, and understanding of, human persons within their particular cultural context.

Data Colonialism and Christian Relief and Development Organizations in the Global North

Recognizing the gap in per capita income between what were then referred to as “developed” and “less developed nations,” the United Nations declared the 1960s as the First United Nations Development Decade (“United Nations Development Decade”). An understanding of the impact of the development decade followed by the technological advances in “big data” capture provides an opportunity to examine the complexity of dealing with technology, data, and efficiency in international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), FBOs, including Christian humanitarian institutions that compete with secular organizations. There is no doubt that what is happening with development data in both Christian and secular organizations is inextricably linked to what some have called “datafication” and “the quantification of the social” (Couldry and Meijas 2018, 16). Given Western influence on global development trends, the concepts of datafication or “data colonialism” may help challenge Western FBOs to question the widespread and large-scale extraction and wholesale appropriation of personal data from the Global South (Ibid.).

According to Couldry and Meijas, data colonialism combines the predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism with the abstract quantification of data by computers or other highly technical processes. Data are harvested as a natural resource, de-personalized, and dispersed to various entities to be used for profit or gain. The legitimate owners of this data, the people from whom it is collected, are neither informed nor compensated. Deploying the concept of data colonialism to Christian organizations’ data-gathering is not to suggest that these organizations are as brutal or as violent as historical colonialists. Rather, we use the framing of colonialism to understand what Couldry and Meijas call a “naturalization” of data appropriation that has been adopted by Christian institutions that paves the way for the exploitation of the vulnerable, ignores the protection of individual rights, and most importantly blatantly disregards the inherent dignity of the human person made in the image of God.

Consider an example from a different context: the well-known case of Henrietta Lacks. According to a recent article in the *New York Times*:

Henrietta Lacks, a Black mother of five, was dying of cervical cancer in 1951, when doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore took a sample of her cells without her knowledge or consent.

The invasive procedure led to a revolutionary discovery: Her cells were the first to reproduce in a laboratory, which no human cells had done before, allowing researchers to develop vaccines for polio and the coronavirus and treatments for disease including cancer, Parkinson’s and the flu.

But it would be more than two decades before her family knew that the cells were fueling research in laboratories all over the world, and even in space, creating an unparalleled medical legacy.

On Tuesday, which would have been Ms. Lacks’s 103rd birthday, some of her descendants gathered at a news conference after reaching a settlement with a biotechnology company that they had accused in a lawsuit of profiting from the cell line named for her, HeLa.⁵

Often, the “person” whose “personal data” are extracted is unaware that she is being subjected to this process. Of course, development initiatives may often require the collection of some data, in some form, and by some systematic methods. Western-based Christian organizations function on a global scale. Proving the comparative advantage of FBOs over large-scale secular development organizations demands the extraction and appropriation of vast quantities of personal data from poor and vulnerable program beneficiaries. Furthermore, on matters such as contraceptive usage and maternal health, attempts to justify the collection of personal data may take different forms. FBOs may see personal development data capture as necessary and important to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of program outcomes. On the other hand, and not unlike their secular counterparts, they may be compelled to rely on a conception of the human person that reduces and reconfigures her as a “resource that is *just there*” (Couldry and Meijas 2019, 4).

Although the structure of colonialism is different today, we should understand that the mechanics of colonial power exploiting the vulnerable and exerting control still underlie certain forms of data gathering in the Global South. Covert and clandestine methods of data extraction and appropriation may be hard to detect, by their very nature, like the extraction of the

⁵ For more information, see Holpuch 2023.

cells of Henrietta Lacks in the 1950s. But in my extensive firsthand acquaintance with the research approaches and methods employed by Global North-based religious and secular development agencies operating in the Global South, such methods and approaches continue and often remain unquestioned among the governments and secular and religious actors in the development industry. It simply is a widespread reality that such agencies seldom impose on themselves the kinds of rigorous respect for principles of consent, transparency, and confidentiality that Institutional Review Boards impose on university-based research in both Western and non-Western countries. Secular agencies may justify data appropriation because they may sincerely view the process of extraction and utilization of information as necessary to improve the lives of those in need. These agencies may regard data as a valuable natural resource that is in abundant supply but is not being put to good use. Like petroleum, timber, or any other abundant but underused resource, data may have little value until they are repackaged and reconfigured to be used in development programs.⁶ But research by Christian organizations—organizations that profess to respect the inviolable God-given dignity of every human person—must view the subjects of research as ends in themselves and not as mere means or instruments to some larger goal, however worthy it may be.

Both a colonial mindset and a form of paternalism may underlie and animate data collection efforts by large development agencies, both Christian and secular. While there is little doubt that the motivation of data collection is to improve the economic and spiritual lives of the poor and vulnerable, Northern-led data gathering often frames themselves as the only ones who know what is best and who can process, assess, and manage data. In some cases, due to a lack of skilled capacity in-country, there is a significant gap between the skill sets of the staff in the Western headquarters and those in local offices. Yet colonialism and decolonization of data are not only about the dichotomous power imbalance between Christian experts in the North and subjects in the South. Solutions are being offered by the Christians in the Global North in the name of and for the perceived good of people in the Global South. Yet just as in colonial times, people in the Global South are not

full and legitimate participants in charting their own path to progress. Putting decolonization into practice could begin with investing in capacity strengthening in Global South institutions and decentralization of power to individuals in-country to actively pose their own questions, collect their own data, produce their own authoritative knowledge, and advance and implement their own development agendas.

Decolonizing and Changing the Terms of Reference for Development Data Gathering: Among Dalit Communities in the Slums of Bangalore and Chennai

For scholars, activists, and practitioners, particularly those who have adopted a decolonial turn in their work and practice, the use of participatory methodologies may provide an acceptable and immediately accessible technique of representation and analysis that is in line with Audra Simpson's concern that scholars pay attention to "what people say," instead of "writing away from and to dominant forms of knowing" (Simpson 2007, 68). If decolonization of development data means fundamentally changing the relationship between the Majority World and Western FBOs, it seems reasonable to say that the way poverty, deprivation, well-being, freedom, and happiness, to name a few, are conceptualized and on which data are collected among the peoples of the Majority World will have to undergo a radical transformation.

The following section represents powerfully and forcefully what happens when poor and vulnerable individuals and communities are allowed to say something—in their own words and on their own terms—about their intersecting lived realities of crushing poverty and religious restriction. This project, which was conducted under the auspices of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, illustrates how it might be possible to change the terms of reference and possibly decolonize development data collection among the poor even during an exigent circumstance and urgent crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (CREID 2021).

The purpose of the research was to highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of

⁶ Large-scale humanitarian and relief organizations use digital technology, including various forms of digital data, to manage critical aid particularly to communities in hard-to-reach locations. World Vision uses a digital mapping system called "Last Mile Mobile Solutions," or LMMS, (<https://www.wvi.org/opinion/view/inculcating-culture-innovation-development-sector>) to deliver aid to remote rural areas. LMMS captures demographic and vulnerability data for all individuals in a household. The system then provides individuals with a digital identity registration card. By the circumstances they find themselves in, beneficiaries are subordinate and unable to question the capture of their personal data including their vulnerability status that might include their religious identity. Humanitarian aid technology prompts us to question how care and control are interlinked. In such cases, World Vision's digital registration card may be regarded as a form of power that blurs the line between empowerment and control.

traditionally excluded groups, such as religious minorities, women, and Dalits. The relevant impact of the pandemic is not restricted to its economic consequences. If it were, it would be reasonably easy to develop economic measures to ameliorate the adverse outcomes of COVID-19. Instead, persistent poverty among these pockets of those with low income must be understood as decisively shaped and exacerbated by vulnerabilities that arise because of long-standing constraints on freedom, including the freedom of religion or belief or “FoRB”—i.e., the freedom to hold, change, express, and practice one’s own authentic, conscientious judgments about spiritual truth and ultimate reality.

The Methodology

This research project drew on interviews conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in two urban-poor slums in Chennai and three urban-poor slums in Bangalore in India. As mentioned above, the focus of the research was to identify the economic, social, and spiritual impact of the pandemic on the lives of vulnerable individuals living on the margins of society in urban India. In many local and national disasters, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, women, and other vulnerable groups of people are often among the worst affected, and at the same time, enjoy the least access to effective systems of support and resilience (Bethel, Burke, and Britt 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic was no exception. The research explored the role of freedom of religion or belief during and after the pandemic. In addition, the research examined the direct and indirect consequences of religious identity—and of the construction and treatment of religious identity—on the ability of the poor to navigate the lockdown. Given the constraints of conducting in-person data collection during the pandemic, the team was keen to assess whether and how Freedom of Religion or Belief, where it existed and could be exercised, generated positive consequences during the lockdown. The team considered the ways in which individuals who enjoyed the freedom to exercise and express their religion were able to navigate and, in some cases, overcome the various disruptions and challenges posed by a national lockdown that lasted for more than three months.

Twelve participatory inquiry groups were conducted with a total of 96 participants. Data were collected through drawings, individuals’ reflections, ranking and scoring matrices, and sixteen semi-structured interviews. Separate groups of men and women from each religious minority were convened, with facilitators of the same religion and gender where possible. Discussions were conducted in participants’ preferred language (Urdu, Tamil, Kannada, Hindi, English).

The data included transcripts from sixteen semi-structured interviews and twelve participatory inquiry groups which included a total of 96 participants. Data from the groups and interviews were transcribed and analyzed.

Inquiry groups in each site began with a River or Road of Life exercise, which enabled participants to each share the stories of their lives over the last eighteen months, from before the pandemic to their experiences of life in the shadow of COVID-19. This exercise prompted group discussion of the issues and was followed by a participatory rural appraisal matrix ranking exercise to identify the group’s most pressing issues.

Following the River of Life exercise, researchers led discussions that outlined the challenges stated by each participant through the use of a matrix. Using numbered cards or stones, the participants registered the severity of each challenge on a scale of 0 to 3. During the presentation of the rivers/roads, and the ranking exercise, major themes emerged in the discussions, prompted with additional questions from the researchers. These included experiences of targeting of religious minorities/marginalized groups, especially during COVID-19, and the impact of the pandemic on their livelihoods, health, security/safety, mobility, education, religion, and general well-being. The methods enabled reflection on whether the intersection of variables such as class, gender, and age heightened such vulnerabilities. Participants were also asked to rank the level of help or advantage gained from a variety of enablers on a scale of 0 to 3. Enablers included help from the government in the form of food or other rations, friendship, and the role of the Transcendent during the trials of the pandemic. Table 2 below illustrates the enablers identified by Dalit Christian men in Chennai.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The target sample for this study included representatives of the Dalit community who belonged to the minority and the majority religious communities. These included Muslim women and men, Christian (Protestant and Catholic) women and men, and Hindu women and men. All the individuals in our sample had lived in their respective slums for more than two years and were daily wage laborers or individuals who were employed in professions (such as drivers or bakers) who could not earn money working from home. Most of the individuals in our sample had children or grandchildren in school.

Recalibrating the Methodology to Examine Freedom of Religion or Belief During the Pandemic

Most of the individuals in our target sample belonged to the Dalit (previously known as “outcaste”)

community. As noted, respondents were daily-wage laborers. To access individuals from hard-to-reach communities, such as Muslim women in the slum, we worked closely with local facilitators and our contacts in the slum, who were of the same faith and gender as those they studied. In Bangalore, the staff of a local high school served as the major points of connection and facilitation. Administrators of the high school introduced us to parents from the slums who welcomed the opportunity to venture out to participate in our in-

person focus group discussion after being “sheltered-in-place” for over three months. Table 1 illustrates the respondent profiles of the individuals who participated in the focus group discussions in Chennai and Bangalore. All our meetings were conducted in the local community and with the informed consent of the participants.

Table 1: Profile of Research Participants in Chennai and Bengaluru, India. February – April 2021

Category	Number	Slum Name, City
Dalit Christian Men - Chennai	8	Korrukupet, Chennai
Dalit Muslim Men - Chennai	8	Vyarsapadi, Chennai
Dalit Hindu Men - Chennai	8	Korrukupet, Chennai
Dalit Christian Women - Chennai	7	Korrukupet, Chennai
Dalit Muslim Women - Chennai	7	Vyarsapadi, Chennai
Dalit Hindu Women - Chennai	8	Korrukupet, Chennai
Dalit Christian Men - Bengaluru	10	Lingarajapuram, Bangalore
Dalit Muslim Men - Bengaluru	6	Sait Palya, Bangalore
Dalit Hindu Men - Bengaluru	6	Baglur Slum, Bangalore
Dalit Christian Women - Bengaluru	11	Lingarajapuram
Dalit Muslim Women - Bengaluru	5	Sait Palya
Dalit Hindu Women	12	New Lingarajapuram
Total	96	

The River of Life and Ranking Exercises

The participatory methods were drawn from a cluster of methods available to social scientists and practitioners designed to foster genuine participant inquiry.⁷ We employed these participatory methods to enlarge our shared imagination and concerns about what it means to be human. Specifically, what does it mean to be a human who is both deeply diminished socially, politically, and economically and yet also profoundly religious and oriented to the transcendent, during a time of serious upheaval and distress brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic? As such, at least at the outset of the exercise, the participatory method we employed aimed to create a research environment in which Dalit Muslim, Christian, and Hindu men and women were empowered to serve as intellectual

collaborators as well as leaders of inquiry group discussions.

Unlike the regimented and bounded reach of traditional methods, such as structured and semi-structured interviews, the participatory methodological approach of using reasonably flexible and open methods of inquiry—such as the River of Life drawing exercise—was designed to encourage local voices to be expressed, with the help of as little external direction as possible. The ranking exercise was designed to give policymakers a quantifiable idea of the extent of various intersecting deprivations facing religious minorities. We acknowledge, however, that the mechanistic process of “translating” the experiences of the very poorest members of the slum community occurs within a power structure. There are significant concerns about how researchers using participatory methods “translate”

⁷ To learn more about participatory methodology, see <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/prmmanual-v1-1.pdf>

religious experiences, including religious practices and beliefs of individuals in the Global South. Within the constraints of this project, we were able to identify certain issues that, although particular to the special social context (urban poor slums), were easier to relate to the Western context.

Our interest in adopting participatory methodologies to gather information on the impact of COVID-19 on religious minorities in India did not grow out of isolated and limited attention to research methodology. Rather, we started with a strong conviction that had grown from seeing how participatory methodologies, particularly the River of Life exercise, could highlight the lived experiences of religious communities, including religious minorities and Dalit Hindus, and build their confidence to speak up and challenge power structures that constrained their ability to thrive before and after the pandemic. The experiences of the project team of Indian scholars working with very poor and marginalized communities for decades and a growing conviction that the freedom of the poor to enjoy the right to believe and practice their religion or beliefs prompted the team to identify an inclusive and empowering data gathering approach.⁸

The Possibility of Trading Places

Conducting an intensive research exercise at the height of a global pandemic, and following one of the world's most stringent national lockdowns, required extreme caution. To overcome some of the understandable reticence and unease our respondents were experiencing, we brought them into focus-group discussions in which small communities of individuals from Dalit backgrounds and religious minority communities could speak as much to each other as to us. In so doing, our research built on the social capital and relational depth that one often sees in poor communities, in which individuals have lived beside each other for generations, sharing each other's sorrows and joys.

Consider this conversation among the group of Dalit Christian women we gathered for the focus group discussion. The group realized that one of their neighbors was depressed because she was lonely during the lockdown:

Lakshmi: But being locked inside reminded me of feeling the same way when my husband died. When he died, I felt that the entire, whole world is gone. Being alone inside I thought I have no one, and I felt like an orphan.... I used to talk normally with people, but again, when I go inside, I cry again.

I drew this rock here again in my river because I don't know with whom I am going to stand, no one is there for me.... (crying) Everyone is scared of Corona but I think I should have died during Corona (crying).

Respondent in the group: Don't say that. Please don't talk like that.

Another respondent in the group: Please don't cry. We are there for you. We understand....

As we sat in the slum talking with the deeply broken men and women during one of the toughest times in their lives, our work of describing and documenting their lives and converting their stories into "data" that would yield "results" in the form of policies, was in some small way less extractive because of the way we approached the exercise.

The slum with its tight networks and forced proximity enabled the women and men to understand what the personalist philosopher Edmund Husserl called "the possibility of trading places" (Duranti 2010). By this, we find that our respondents in the slum, because of their shared experiences and struggles, can see the world from the point of view of the other person—i.e., they have the real possibility of exchanging places. This is made clear in the exchange among the women in the focus group in the slum in Chennai and was just as evident across other groups in our sample. By allowing respondents the possibility of "trading places," we had contributed in some small way to healing and restoring the community, even as we gathered our "data" and "documented" our results. Furthermore, the River of Life methodology, with its inclusive and interactive nature, draws on the genuine empathy and compassion present between group members and between the researcher and the participants.

Any decolonized development data infrastructure that fosters respect and a sense of dignity between the members of a community and between the staff or facilitators of an organization requires reducing the distance between these individuals. What is meant by this? In traditional data collection exercises such as surveys, fieldworkers or NGO personnel who document the results of a program typically remove themselves from the process of data collection and begin to label individuals ostensibly for efficient and effective data collection. In doing so, fieldworkers place the "observed" in categories that give them the authority

⁸ To learn more about the "River of Life" participatory methodology, see the following article by Ziad Moussa: <https://pubs.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/G02828.pdf>.

to construct “objective” and scientifically “rigorous” narratives about the individuals.

Our approach was qualitatively different in both approach and data generated from some traditional data-gathering exercises undertaken during the pandemic to gather information on religion and COVID. For example, a repository of data to provide policymakers and practitioners with data regarding the responses of religious communities was created and housed at a university in Washington, DC. Much of the data may be extracted from communities, including vulnerable communities, in a purely impersonal process involving neither interaction with, nor the consent of, the populations from whom data is collected. Furthermore, the knowledge that was “curated” by Western scholars and development practitioners, ostensibly to aid vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, was generated and utilized from the extracted data without any involvement or input from the rightful owners. The irony here is that efforts to decolonize aid have had little impact on the colonial frameworks that undergird much of the development data gathering from the Global South.

Over the course of our research, the participatory methods that were used to collect data in India sought to empower rather than disempower the poor, even as the main aim of the participant ranking exercise was to describe and document their experiences with a view to converting the key results of our conversations into data-gathering exercises destined to yield results and create quantifiable matrices that would inform policy documents and briefings. This brings us to the core difference between the suite of data-gathering participatory methods and the traditional data collection methods that occur in isolation from the rightful data owners in the countries and communities in the South. In most cases, data collectors who employ traditional extractive data-gathering methods create systems and promote ideologies that justify their appropriation of data in the name of rigor and data quality that, it is claimed, are needed for proper project management and evaluation. However, from our experience, good quality, quantifiable data on the challenges and enablers that most affected vulnerable populations at the height of the pandemic was achievable with deliberate effort and patience on the part of the trained facilitators who spent time explaining how the ranking exercise works and the ways in which the community could benefit from the data that was gathered.

Another way in which development data confer power to the researcher in traditional data collection exercise is when she documents and relegates, say, an individual in a micro-credit program to another timeframe, often one that is behind the one she

occupies in the present (Fabian and Bunzl 2014). For example, the poor and marginalized are situated in a period that is technologically and economically backward or static, while the fieldworker resides in the active and advanced present. These “distancing devices” serve not only to deny the poor the equality they deserve but also to reinforce a sense of “otherness” (Ibid., 31).

Positionality and the Poor

The methodology employed in the slums of Chennai and Bangalore enabled facilitators to intervene by asking questions and seeking responses of their own. The methodology thus enabled them to participate in the process “not [just] attentionally but intentionally” (Ingold 2013, 395). Truly examining the ravages of the pandemic in the lives of the poor, particularly those who belonged to Dalit and minority religious communities, required facilitators to trade places with participants, inviting the participants to lead and drive the conversation. In addition, our research objectives and methods required us, as Tim Ingold states, to “observe from inside” (Ibid., 389).

One example of this is the case of Laila, who facilitated the conversation (or exercise) among Dalit Muslim women in Bangalore. Over years of teaching, she had developed a tacit knowledge of the problems and struggles facing the women sitting before her. Although Laila might be regarded as an “insider” whose roots were in the local community, she was still in many respects as an “outsider” because of her education and her job as a schoolteacher. To better collaborate with the women and gain their confidence, Laila needed to reduce their perception of her as both an outsider and an expert who knows more and is better able to speak on their behalf. In the following excerpt, Laila began the River of Life exercise by talking about her fears and worries during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown:

“My friend has talked. Now I will tell you about my river... See, before lockdown, all was good. My husband runs a hotel. But after the lockdown, things changed. We had no business. Money was less. Think of your life. That was my life.”

As a person of deep religious convictions, a woman, a schoolteacher, a wife, and a resident of the local community, Laila occupied multiple positions that intersected. As an educated Muslim woman who has the freedom to seek employment outside the home, Laila might be regarded as an “outsider” who was therefore able to transcend some of the challenges faced by women in her community. Yet Laila was also very clearly an “insider” who shared the vulnerability

and concerns of the women by virtue of her gender, religious tradition, and geographic proximity to the slum where participants live.

Identifying and Documenting Real-Life Impact

A further major advantage of studying the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in slum communities was the opportunity to focus on the realities on the ground and enter the real-life experiences of the poor in their range and depth. This enabled us to zero in on the effects of living conditions and of public policies that directly affect their lives rather than rely on a mechanistic and reductionist understanding that locates the sources of deprivation in supposedly “objective” factors that are external to the lived experiences, perceptions, responses, and choices of the poor.

Our engagement with those individuals who reside in stubborn pockets of poverty in the slums, precisely because it seeks to illuminate the limits, dangers, and predicaments of their minority and marginalized status at the time of COVID-19, must systematically and sympathetically examine the identities, values, and norms of these individuals. Such a systematic and sympathetic intellectual effort is especially necessary when the researchers might judge these identities, values, and norms to be “oppressive,” “patriarchal,” or “traditional.” Although specific examples are likely to be contentious, it is undoubtedly true that certain religious practices, religious beliefs, and institutions reaffirm and reinforce problematic patterns of patriarchy and gender inequity (Tadros 2010). And these constraints on freedom and uplift certainly need our deliberate and careful attention. Through social movements, legislation, and the media, much more needs to be done to limit and even eliminate those aspects of culture that constrain and diminish human flourishing, and such aspects undoubtedly include problematic practices and beliefs related to religion.

At the same time, our focus group discussions with some of the poorest, most marginalized, and abjectly poor individuals in urban poor slums in Bangalore and Chennai identified cultural and religious beliefs and participation in religious communities as key factors that empowered and sustained them at times of significant crisis and social and economic upheaval. Our methodology’s open-ended and versatile epistemic apertures, particularly involving the use of non-textual strategies of drawing, were designed to capture the profound and often radically interior and subjective impact of deeply held religious beliefs and tight-knit religious networks. This methodological approach invited our respondents to narrate—in their chosen language and symbology—how such beliefs and networks influenced the human spirit and resilience of those who live in pockets of persistent poverty, without

directing or dominating the discussion with preconceived ideas about their faith or lack of faith.

Consider the following participant ranking from our sample of Dalit Christian men in the Korukkupet slum in Chennai during the COVID-19 pandemic. The men were asked to consider what factors had harmed or enabled them to survive through the draconian national lockdown. The eight men in the group identified five categories of beneficial or enabling factors. The order followed the one in which the men ranked the different categories with the highest-ranking appearing first. These categories were the following:

- the role of the church community in their lives,
- a personal experience of God during the lockdown,
- better relationships with their family,
- assistance from their relatives, and
- support from the government.

Based on the men’s ranking of how important the factors were relative to each other, Table 2 on the next page illustrates that the most important impacts related to the church and their faith in God.

As the table illustrates, government assistance either in the form of cash and in-kind transfers or police protection during riots was ranked lowest compared to help obtained from religious institutions. Furthermore, the men in this sample deeply valued their relationship with God. What is interesting is that at the height of one of the harshest lockdowns in the world, religious factors were not ignored or outranked by what some might consider more “objective” financial or health factors. It is likely, of course, that such relative rankings would be dynamic over time. Yet we see similar results for poor individuals from Muslim, Hindu, and Christian religious communities. Religious institutions and deeply held religious beliefs were consistently ranked as very beneficial for the poor in helping them negotiate the multi-faceted fallout of the pandemic in their communities.

Listening to those on the margins sounds obvious. Yet Western agencies often hear what confirms their own assumptions and plans for the program. As Erica Bornstein notes in her research on Zimbabwe, when asked why sponsorship money could not be sent directly to the parents to buy things for their children, local staff from the Northern Christian agency told her that “the sponsor looked to the needs of the child not to the family” (2005, 93). In doing so, Bornstein suggests that the staff member “unconsciously articulated the power relations of transnational classes—of sponsors and the sponsored—in her depiction of the parent and child relationship” (Ibid., 93).

Table 2: Ranking of Enabling Factors for Christian Men in Korukkupet Slum in Chennai – March 2021

* Names changed to protect survey respondents

	Names*	Help from Relatives/Wife	Church (Role of Church members/Pastor/Priest)	Experiencing God’s Presence	Family Bond	Government and Local Community Support
1.	Arputhraj	2	3	3	3	1
2.	Jayakumar	3	3	3	3	0
3.	Kumar	2	3	3	3	0
4.	Rajendra	2	3	3	3	2
5.	Dayalan	1	3	3	3	2
6.	James	0	3	3	3	1
7.	Raja	2	3	3	3	1
8.	Thomas	1	3	3	1	1
Total		13	24	24	22	8

The structure and mechanics of most data gathering for development are designed to move rapidly from instruction by international experts and staff to local staff and then to local program participants. For example, in a healthcare setting, local medical staff are rarely engaged as peer-mentors for international doctors. If they are, they are often labeled as “local” experts, which immediately conveys limited and bounded expertise and experience. Decolonizing data gathering not only recognizes but prioritizes the significant technical and practical knowledge and experience of Global South experts. Additionally, decolonizing the data collection process to include intentionally listening to voices from the margins establishes mutual ownership of data and recognizes the agency of the individuals who consent to share their data for the common good.

Our methodology and measures thus attempted to capture the voices and lived experiences of those individuals living in persistent poverty and on the margins of society. The effort to capture such individuals' lived experiences and subjective perceptions is especially crucial, for their survival often demands a complex set of factors and dynamics. Such factors and dynamics may enable the poor and marginalized not only to subsist, but in some cases to proactively engage and even overcome the economic, social, and spiritual constraints on their well-being. By this, I mean that the process of being able to discuss the challenges individuals face at home or in the community may help them take active steps to overcome these problems rather than simply relate them to a researcher as part of a survey or questionnaire. For example, women who faced increased domestic violence during the pandemic lockdown shared their experiences with other women

in the group and were able to get help with resources to handle the abuse.

Many Global North individuals and institutions in the Christian relief sector ostensibly work from the protected distance of an office in the West or a local city in the Global South. Their efforts are carefully framed in the language of effectiveness, outcomes, and impacts. Some staff may even know a few program participants by name, but I wonder how many development professionals really want to get involved in the messiness of people’s lives. The highly professionalized development world with its timely reporting, programmatic efficiency, and objective research gives people ample reasons to stay aloof. Data gatherers are urged to achieve a certain kind of “distance” and “neutrality” throughout the research process. Otherwise, facilitators may introduce elements that risk “contaminating” the dynamics of objective research and the data-gathering exercise. One may nevertheless question whether avoiding all identification with participants is possible or even ethical. Decolonizing data collection involves rectifying power imbalances and restoring control of data to the rightful owners, but most importantly decolonization of data gathering compels Christians to be among the poor, to befriend them, assist them, and to accompany them.

Conclusion

Writing in 1961, the Yale political scientist Robert Dahl provided a classic definition of power: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl 1957, 202). To Christian development scholars and practitioners working in rural Bihar or Mumbai’s slums,

it might seem farfetched to apply Dahl's classic definition of power to their Christ-centered services. On the other hand, when we examine the history of development data extraction, appropriation, commodification, and utilization in the West since the end of World War II, we realize that it might not seem so farfetched to apply Dahl's concept of power to Christian relief and development organizations. The structures of power in the development industry have become so entrenched even at the local levels that we may not recognize or identify them.

It is important to recognize that most Northern Christian development organizations do not set out to deliberately impose power inequities, sustain structural barriers, or govern people in the manner of a colonial government. Yet, it is entirely plausible that by employing various assumptions, modes of thinking, and practices in the organization and production of data, Christian agencies foster forms of willful blindness and perpetuate ignorance. A decolonized data praxis challenges how colonialism may be pervasive but is not dealt with in current operations because those engaged in data collection may have not grasped the extent of the problem. Disassociating from the issues and ignoring the problems inherent in some Western-centric forms of data collection foreclose the possibility of much-needed changes in the way individuals and institutions in the Global South actively engage in their own future development and progress. A decolonized data collection praxis means constantly and collectively thinking about and working towards reaffirming our commitment to Christ-centered service by embracing a vision of authentic development that empowers and uplifts those excluded and on the margins of society, and pursues modes of thinking and action that enable human beings to live dignified and flourishing lives.

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