
Obedience to God Requires Decolonization: Reflections of a Practitioner

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Before commenting on *CRDA*'s special issue on decolonization, I want briefly to explain the lenses through which I am reading. I'm not an expert on decolonization and I am not an academic. Instead, I am a practitioner who has worked at Compassion International in Central America for close to twenty years. The roles I have had have been different and varied; some have been in direct implementation, and others have involved supporting local church partners so they can implement the program. A lot of my time has been serving in a regional role and most of my day-to-day work involved taking the big strategy for standards developed by our headquarters and mediating and bridging that perspective with the different contexts and nuances and perspectives of our local country teams. Now, more recently, I have served in a global role and have lots of learning and lots of work to do. I was born and grew up in Guatemala, in a marginal community, in poverty. Even though I was not subjected to it myself, I nevertheless witnessed the discrimination that my fellow Guatemalans of indigenous descent suffered, a reality that continues to the present day.

Reading this special issue as a non-expert on this topic provided me with space to reflect and gave me language and additional definitions. I think I'm in a better place now to identify areas in my own work where more intentional work is needed. The articles all conclude that the importance about decolonizing international development lies in the image of God, *imago deo*, that all human beings are created equal and in the image of God. The core question we need to answer is — Are we going to accept this truth and are we going to take action? Are we convinced enough to act on it? We could also argue that localization, when solutions are developed locally, is more effective, more relevant in the context and more likely to be sustained over time. But it's very clear to us that decolonization is important, because it is an act of obedience to God. It goes beyond mere effectiveness. This work is also important because, as we're seeking to do justice in our work and humbly obey God, he transforms us. We get a truthful understanding of who we are, and then we are

able to perceive and participate in God's plan for reconciling the world to himself. He's the protagonist and the owner of the plan, and we have the privilege of joining him in what he's already doing in the communities we seek to serve.

I want to underscore practical lessons that I got, especially from the articles about MCC, Tearfund, and ANADESA. Their journeys and collective efforts bring valuable insights for all of us in the realm of international development. The first such insight is that these organizations created spaces for reflection on the Word of God with regard to their mission and their approach to mission. They were willing to struggle with the tough questions. Some of these questions are— What are the primary interests we are concerned with? Who has the power in decision-making in this relationship? Which voices do we hear most often? What is our role in what God is doing in the communities where we want to serve? As a result of their commitment and their openness to be shaken by scripture, all three organizations achieved deeper and clearer understandings of their mission and the meaning of justice.

The other important practice to highlight is that clear understanding moved them to take action, and they moved from direct implementation and central design to accompaniment and localized design. As a result, they witnessed increased partner confidence and institutional capacity in their partners. One of the organizations, Tearfund, made changes to their organizational structure to include more voices from the majority world in the board and executive roles. As a result, they experienced more diverse voices, both in setting the agenda and enriching debate. These organizations also let go of some extreme biases. They became willing to accept that they didn't know everything and became more open to local tools and approaches. As a result, they were able to see more creative solutions, mixing local Global South perspectives with Global North perspectives, and also were able to support them and promote the use of locally developed tools. Finally, these organizations were humble, but they were also bold enough to

acknowledge where they needed to decolonize their work and take action.

I was especially impressed with the article about ANADESA and MCC, and I want to highlight some of their significant insights. ANADESA is an Indigenous community development entity located in Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala. They started working with MCC as a partner right around the time when MCC was moving away from direct implementation and toward partnership and accompaniment. As part of their journey, it became evident to MCC that ANADESA did very transformative development work, but in unique ways, ways that were nevertheless very effective in their context. ANADESA also talked about their work in unique ways. Their leaders and staff gradually changed their story and their narrative from talking about needs and lacks to a conversation about human rights, worth, and vision. They were now able to push back on MCC and express their preferences as an institution and in partnership. Finally, it is encouraging to learn how ANADESA's female staff were able to identify when they were being subject to coloniality, the legacy of colonialism, and discrimination by their fellow Indigenous male colleagues who were leaders of their organization at the time. Because they had a truth-based view of who they were and a vision for what their organization should be or what they what they wanted it to be, they put a plan into action to change the leadership, and they were able to get accompaniment and support from their partner MCC to see it become a reality. This is particularly exciting, because one can see how the women internalized the truth that all humans are created in the image of God, which gave them confidence to be able to identify and overcome coloniality within their own community and organization.

Contemplating the future of decolonization, I believe we will fail to progress unless our organizations spend time in the Word thinking about mission, but also bring in more diverse voices from the majority world to set the agenda for these conversations. I also believe that this needs to be done alongside an effort to bring donors and funders with us on the journey of understanding God's truth about equality and justice.

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