

Lessons learned: a review

CAN COOPERATION BE DECOLONIZED? DISCOMFORT, RUPTURES AND LESSONS LEARNED

An account from the Ephemeral Team 'Decolonize Cooperation and Feminist Practice'
for the period 2021-2025.



OXFAM

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We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the review team for their meticulous and loving editing of this text, and to all the activists and thinkers who devoted their time and energy to the collective spaces from which this publication emerged: Adriana Guzmán, Diana Vargas and Jimena Tejerina, Celenis Rodríguez, Ochy Curiel, La Negra Albornoz, Victoria Rovira and Lorena Kab'nal. We would also like to thank the participatory action research organizations: Iranu Collective, Galfisa, Tierra Viva, Mujeres Defensoras de la Vida and Capullitas de Alelí. Lastly, we would like to thank the decolonial feminists from whom we have learned so much, as well as the activists at Oxfam who generously shared their lessons learned, struggles, joys and critical reflections on the challenging question of decolonising cooperation. **Thanks to each and every one of them.**

Design and illustration: Lina Sanabria and Valeria Duran.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This document is a record of lessons learned in the journey travelled by the Decolonial Ephemeral Team, a team situated in Oxfam in Lac that since 2021 has reflected on the possibilities and limitations of decolonizing cooperation.

It is the result of a four-year process of 'curatorship'¹ of experiences, feelings and knowledges. Like curators of an artistic process, the team presents the outcomes of the profound epistemic and everyday journey, grounded in uncomfortable questions and collective exchanges with activists and influential individuals speaking from their own bodies and lived experiences of resistance.

This material is the exhibition, crafted by hand, of what was shared in the journey through these knowledges. It is an experimental research project that examines the depths of the diverse forms of wisdoms and does not seek to crystallize or render static conversations and exchanges. The questions asked during the research process centred on lessons to be learned and allowed for flexible responses, recognising that they give rise to intertwined pathways that lead to further questions, reflections and actions – some of which foster continued reflection and action, while others remain, for the moment, unanswered and left for further debate. Here, it should be noted that the aim is not to produce fixed responses in a dialectical dialogue typical of Western binary question-and-answer epistemology.

This nuanced review emphasizes the importance of valuing processes, recognizing that learning experiences are constantly evolving, and that they will even eventually transcend what is written here.

This text compiles critical opinions from a decolonial feminist viewpoint, and therefore, it is important to note that **discomfort**, 'is a sine qua non condition of this process'² (taken from the document *Aprendizajes, Dolores y Gozos: ¿Cooperación Descolonial?*³), since it is inevitable and fundamental to questioning and proposing transformation.

This analysis of wisdoms and lessons learned invites readers to **sit with the discomfort, tensions and contradictions as an integral part of the process.**

'This conversation is long and requires us to be radical and sit with discomfort. As we talk, moving towards this horizon, we must de-normalise many colonial elements and stop being lenient with **white discomfort.**' *Aprendizajes, Dolores y Gozos: ¿Cooperación Descolonial?* (2024).

¹According to curator Cristina Lleras (2021), the word 'curatorship' (or 'curadoría' in Spanish) has the same etymology as 'care' (or 'cuidar') and today is understood as a 'system of building narratives based on relationships and connections'. As an activity, it refers to the responsibility of conceptualizing, selecting, arranging and presenting various elements.

²A Latin term meaning that something is 'indispensable' or 'essential'.

³*Aprendizajes, Dolores y Gozos: ¿Cooperación Descolonial?* is an internal report by the Ephemeral Team that gathers the wisdom shared by Oxfam activists worldwide on whether cooperation can be decolonized.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2025, when this report was written, **decolonizing cooperation was a widely discussed issue**. On the one hand, cooperation organizations and donors are showing interest in this issue, responding to trending agendas, and, in part, to the efforts of feminists who have succeeded in raising awareness within their institutions. This carries a risk of co-optation of decoloniality language,⁴ as previously occurred with the language of feminism. On the other hand, 2025 was a year marked by the dire threat of fundamentalism, anti-rights movements and the extreme right. This had a direct impact on cooperation work, particularly in the south⁵ with cuts and unprecedented defunding (Oxfam Intermón, 2025), having an impact on grassroots organizations, collectives and social movements that are also facing the closure of civic spaces. On the other hand, further issues include the intensification of colonial aggression, the occupation and genocide in Palestine and Sudan, and the growing aggression and political-economic control of the United States on Abya Yala⁶.

Given this situation, building a practical and reflective pathway that navigates the risks, needs and urgencies of the relationship between cooperation and decoloniality means questioning the relationship between donors, agents and social movements. It means re-understanding the south and drawing on the shared histories of solidarity. Being able to take action locally, which gave rise to initiatives like Oxfam, could become a guiding principle for cooperation, effectively shifting hierarchies and accompanying people in their self-determination projects.

Oxfam's Strategic Framework in Latin America and the Caribbean – MERLAC 2021–2025: Towards a new, fairer, more feminist and more sustainable region could already foresee a less colonial institutional approach:

⁴ 'Co-optation of language' refers to using terms like 'decolonial', 'feminist' or 'intersectional' as labels or technical requirements without changing the power structures that keep racism, the patriarchy and the colonial order in place. When the term is removed from the bodies, territories and struggles that gave rise to it, it becomes a decorative adjective: it appears in the logical frameworks, theories of change and institutional communications, but those who define the agenda, who provide the resources, who take the risks and who are recognized as the legitimate source of knowledge remains the same.

⁵ There are other ways to refer to this colonial relationship of power, such as Global North and South, central-periphery, or global majority-minority. In this report, we use 'north' and 'northern' and 'south' and 'southern' as geographical references that acknowledge the significance of colonialism, while intentionally keeping them in lowercase to underscore that coloniality (of power, being and knowledge) is far more complex and profound than a merely material North-South inequality, shaping how power is considered, valued, felt and organized.

⁶ Abya Yala is a decolonial term to refer to the Americas

'In the future, Oxfam will be a smaller organization with a more diverse presence, but will retain the same identity, driven by feminist principles yet without colonial logic'. This report also makes reference to the institutional commitment 'towards the decolonization of power'.

In the report [El Saqueo Continúa](#) (2025) (translated from *Takers not Makers: The unjust poverty and unearned wealth of colonialism*), Oxfam also highlights that the current economic model is based on extractive systems, north-south top-down models, pillaging from territories and bodies and the concentration of wealth – now more than ever. The causes of inequality are therefore understood to be supported by the colonial-patriarchal order, which is why it could potentially be harmful to keep producing, reproducing and legitimizing the tools of that system without critically examining it.

In this context, this report presents a range of demands, recommendations, lessons learned, questions and concerns intended to enrich the discussion among cooperation organizations and institutions, as well as collectives, activists, academics, and others seeking to deepen their knowledge.

All comments represent the first of many steps towards repairing the historic debt that cooperation owes the people. Inspired by the voices, opinions and wisdom that have accompanied the Ephemeral Team, this report highlights key criticisms of the relationship between cooperation and coloniality. For the Ephemeral Team, allocating time, resources and efforts to carefully weave together the criticisms of cooperation is meaningful only if they guide decisions on next steps.

BACKGROUND: WHAT IS THE EPHEMERAL TEAM AND ITS HISTORY?

The 'Decolonize Cooperation and Feminist Practice' Ephemeral Team is a group from Oxfam. It was formed in 2021 by members of the Regional Group for Gender Justice and Women's Rights in Latin America and the Caribbean and people from other departments. The group has prompted reflections from the south and communitarian feminism regarding the relationship between cooperation and decoloniality. The team was formed in line with feminist approaches, Oxfam LAC's Regional Strategic Framework, Oxfam's 2020–2030 Global Strategic Framework and the 2024–2027 Horizon roadmap for which a feminist, decolonial approach is one of the cross-cutting themes.

Similarly, it was created in connection with the agendas prioritized by global south grassroots movements, where the fight for decoloniality – which has existed for centuries – has gradually taken the spotlight in the cooperation sector, particularly promoted by feminist, anti-racist and Indigenous movements in the Abya Yala region.

Since its inception in 2021, the team has led initiatives to gather insights to determine whether the sector can be 'less colonial' and identify the roles and responsibilities of cooperation actors in the decolonial agenda. Accordingly, the team has written opinion pieces, created forums for discussion, and produced videos and webinars. This has been thanks to internal and external allies⁷, including collectives (both partners and independent), thinkers, and communitarian feminist and

decolonial activists. Using this approach, at Oxfam these provocations and reflections were produced creatively with external individuals who are legitimately involved in decolonial communitarian feminist movements from Abya Yala.

This fabric of knowledge involves a process that started with a documentary filmed in **Potosí, Bolivia**, in 2022. This place is particularly representative and symbolic for the topic of coloniality and colonialism, both for its history of dispossession, which continues today through mining, and for its tradition of resistance and advocacy. The documentary [Decolonizar la Cooperación](#) (Decolonizing cooperation) was the result of this process with Feministas Comunitarias Antipatriarcales (anti-patriarchal communitarian feminists), including Adriana Guzmán.



⁷ For Oxfam, internal allies are teams, programmes and people within the Oxfam confederation that support and co-design strategies. External allies are organizations, collectives and networks with which Oxfam shares agendas and initiatives, without necessarily having a formal agreement or funding. Partners are organizations with which Oxfam maintains a formalized cooperation relationship (through conventions or agreements) and that share explicit co-responsibility for programme implementation.

The process continued by opening several **political dialogues** with decolonial feminists from academia and movements, which also **possess situated knowledge about trans, queer, lesbian, Indigenous, community and Afro-descendent realities**. Via open, semi-open, closed, online and in-person sessions, grassroots collectives and influential individuals were encouraged to think critically about the following question: **Can cooperation be decolonized?** All of these dialogues generated documents, texts and experimental materials on the topic.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was also conducted, examining colonial narratives and the logic present in feminist practices alongside five Abya Yala organizations. Over three years, the group included Capullitas de Alelí (El Salvador), the Iranu Collective (Mexico), Asociación Mujeres Defensoras de la Vida (AMDV) (Honduras), Tierra Viva (Guatemala) and the Galfisa Institute of Philosophy (Cuba). Together, we designed a methodology to enable self-reflection and reveal the internal coloniality unique to southern experiences, supporting subsequent decisions and change. Oxfam LAC's Gender Justice team accompanied the process, which resulted in a report, as well as many reflections, new pathways and alternative approaches for the participating social movements and organizations.

Furthermore, the Ephemeral Team facilitated internal dialogue spaces with decolonial feminists who work with Oxfam from all over the world. During these sessions, they shared their discomfort and thoughts on the question 'Can cooperation be decolonized?', a question posed at the core of an international organization recognized as a point of reference in the cooperation sector.



PART 1. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

1. COOPERATION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH COLONIALITY

Contextualizing the criticism against the colonial origins of cooperation is an exercise of historic consciousness, giving space and time to learnings, presented in this document in the framework of the Ephemeral Team's initiatives.

*The book *The Solidarity Economy* (2024) explains that after the mid-twentieth-century Colonial-Liberation Wars, Europe developed new types of relationships with colonized countries. This occurred within an extremely unequal emerging global economy, largely due to the debts that countries 'liberated' from colonization continue to owe their colonizers. In this context, international cooperation mechanisms emerged as a channel from the north to economically 'develop' the south. In this framework, in the 1990s, the United Nations held international conferences that strongly influenced the international cooperation agenda, priorities and dynamics for the following decades, with a 'top-down' approach.*

'Since the 1970s, people have been calling out the problem they have with all these gender offices in multilateral agencies for producing ideas about "the problems of third-world women" and "how we should help third-world women", framing white women as the saviors of third-world women. During the 1980s, the problem was allegedly that women were lagging in terms of development. Development, as an instrument, is predatory in that it allegedly promises that we're going to reach the ideal level of a first-world society.' – Celenis Rodríguez during *Political dialogue: Cooperation, feminisms and decoloniality* (2022).

This 'development' model⁸ helped solidify the non-governmental organization (NGO) model, which entailed receiving funding through international cooperation and integrating colonized countries in the global economy. This model is still in place today with its own strategies, perpetuating coloniality in the south, as Jimena Tejerina demonstrated in the documentary *Descolonizar la Cooperación* (2022), made by the Ephemeral Team: 'There's a colonial process that continues to operate today, and cooperation plays a fundamental role in this. It gives us guidelines on how things should be, without considering that we, as people, have our own civilization and way of life. Five hundred years ago, it was the church and royal institutions. Today, there are other institutions that continue to perpetrate this colonial logic.'

As such, for decades, Abya Yala feminists, such as Norma Mogrovejo, Ochy Curiel and Yuderkys Espinosa-Miñoso have criticized the 'institutionalization' or 'NGO-ization' process of social movements that arises from this cooperation model. This phenomenon is still ongoing, with political and economic consequences and implications for the autonomy of social movements in the south.

⁸ We have used inverted commas for the word 'development' to highlight this model linked to the civilizing-colonial project, which only propounds a Eurocentric idea of progress and well-being as universal. The ecofeminist Vandana Shiva (1988) highlights how this model has ignored and marginalized the ways of life, agency and knowledge of the people of the south.

'We're highlighting that NGOs, which also emerged in [this context], became dependent upon international cooperation, World Bank policies, ODA and the UN-institutionalized policy practices – not only with feminism but across most social movements. This dependency contributed to demobilization, technocratization, and the fragmentation of struggles, which is why we're urging for political and financial autonomy from these types of institutions.' – Ochy Curiel in *International cooperation from a decolonial feminist perspective (2022)*.

This brief overview of the context of cooperation and its relationship with the global south leads to the first chapter of this report, which foregrounds feminist voices in their critical reflections on the impact of cooperation in Abya Yala, its historical debt, and its limitations and possibilities.

1.1. MAIN POINTS MADE BY THE FEMINISTS PARTICIPATING IN THE EPHEMERAL TEAM'S PROCESS

For four years during the dialogue processes, criticism of **cooperation as a colonial tool** was expressed from different places of enunciation and in various ways. This was conveyed not only through words and concepts, but also through the bodies of those from the global south, who clearly envision emancipatory horizons, experience them daily, and endure the effects of colonial wounds⁹. This critical assessment exercise has led to re-examining colonization as a historic/current process, and also coloniality, including the internal coloniality experienced by people of the south as a result of centuries of oppression. This section gives a platform to critical opinions of feminists who, during the Ephemeral Team's initiatives, identified biases and limitations in cooperation's world view, which still remains rooted in northern logic.

What would cooperation look like if it were completely devoid of the conceptual framework of 'development'? If development were to disappear, what would happen to cooperation? Could cooperation continue to operate, or is the development framework necessary for its existence?

Colonial and racist dynamics have been concealed under the guise of development, coupled with the self-perception that 'solidarity' is inherently 'good' and therefore free of hegemonic violence, including patriarchal, racist and colonial violence. However, by building on a scenario of unequal power dynamics, cooperation exists in a context where political, economic, epistemological and cultural control is held over colonized territories. **What does this mean for cooperation?**

'Accepting that the current prevailing concept of development does not consider or recognize all people, cultures and world views [and therefore] extending the aspirations of international cooperation to other common-sense approaches, other political projects best suited to the challenges of the historical moment and the nature of international society. There are ideas aimed at promoting the common good and facilitating dialogue between different world views, such as global coexistence, life sustainability, global justice or "buen vivir" (collective well-being), which could be important points of reference that connect with feminist, decolonial principles that are more mindful of care and diversity.' – [International Cooperation for Global Justice \(2022\) \[only available in Spanish\]](#).

⁹ 'Global north and south' does not only refer to a geographic divide, but also a historic pattern of modern/colonial power that gives a hierarchical structure to territories, bodies and knowledge, as Quijano (2000) and Lugones (2008) present. Similarly, we recognize that there are racialized and impoverished communities on the peripheries in northern countries, and elites and hierarchies in the south, but they occur under different material and political conditions. They are not comparable to the struggles associated with defending lives and territories demonstrated in many global south contexts, as shown through the works of community and Indigenous feminists, such as Lorena Kab'nal or the analyses of Arturo Escobar on 'territories of difference'. To this end, this critical assessment focuses on cooperation's structural power relations, while recognizing the complexities that exist in the south.

During these years, the participants of the dialogues organized by the Ephemeral Team noted that an impoverished south and powerful north exist, rooted in the expropriation of wealth from the peoples of Abya Yala during colonization, which continues today and extends into cooperation's funding logic. Who is cooperation associated with? Where are resources allocated and where do resources come from? These questions are important for the debate surrounding the coloniality of cooperation's funding resources.

'The development and aid sectors are not untouched by the legacy of racism, historical connections to colonialism and the "white savior" complex.' [Oxfam, Takers not makers \(2025\)](#).

The term 'development' is still used today in cooperation jargon, despite having been fiercely criticized for decades for encouraging the division of the world into 'underdeveloped' and 'developed' countries. Ochy Curiel argued such in her opinion piece for the report [International Cooperation for Global Justice](#) in 2022 (only available in Spanish), as did Celenis Rodríguez in an online debate: **cooperation is recognized as part of the colonial legacy because it arises from and feeds into the 'development' discourse.**

'Development has been a fine colonizing instrument since the 1950s until the present day (...) It dispossesses and poisons a territory and then sends over the antidote: the antidote is cooperation.' – Celenis Rodríguez during *Political dialogue: Cooperation, feminisms and decoloniality* (2022).

Anti-patriarchal communitarian feminists Adriana Guzmán, Jimena Tejerina and Diana Vargas stated that the patriarchy and colonization are intrinsically connected. Similarly, during internal dialogues in 2022, the activist Victoria Rovira also highlighted **gender binary, heterosexuality and cis-normativity as part of the colonial legacy.**

'Talking about colonialism and capitalism alone is not enough. For us, we carry it all – colonialism, racism, neoliberalism – in our bodies. And that, indeed, is the patriarchy: the system on which it is (all) built.' – Adriana Guzmán (2022) in the documentary *Descolonizar la cooperación*.

On this matter, Celenis Rodríguez encouraged questioning the understanding of gender as intersected by racism, colonialism and classism that manifests in international cooperation from white, institutional feminism. Victoria

Rovira also questioned how cooperation sustains this legacy by promoting a vision of gender justice rooted in heterosexuality and cis-normativity.

Jen Rubio Florían (Ciguapa) also prompted reflection on how most feminists are usually middle class, influenced by racism and classism stemming from the colonial legacy, meaning they cannot relate to the problems experienced by impoverished people who are abandoned by the state and subject to the violence in the south. This is why this **political blind spot** often permeates into cooperation agendas, even when feminists have decision-making roles.

From this blind spot, situated in the north, far removed from the needs of the movements of the south, and lacking awareness or recognition of the colonial legacy and actions still present today, cooperation continues to impose agendas. It is always from this 'development' approach, based on a political vision and narrative of superiority and hierarchization, imposing 'solutions' to what the north perceives as 'problems' in the south. Adriana Guzmán mentioned that cooperation is not on an equal footing with communities, thus creating a hierarchical relationship. Disconnected from the south's reality, cooperation **idealizes the life models of the north**, basing its narratives on ideas that praise development and progress as a measure of the south's well-being.

This even extends to criticism about the internal workings of cooperation itself. During the Dialogues, struggles and joys session in 2024, in-depth conversations were held about how even within cooperation itself, this inequality is shown in the **relationships of power and hierarchies** of the offices and people of the north over those engaged in cooperation from the south. Tasks such as decision-making, agenda setting and resource allocation often fall into the hands of and serve the interests of the north, even when people from the south are working within the institutions.

Other comments also highlighted **that donors hold the power**, as they control the purse strings and make decisions about how resources are allocated, under what conditions and in what time frames. In the Ephemeral Team's 2023 dialogue sessions, six collectives questioned the dynamics of resource allocation that have led to the bureaucratization, precariousness and dismantling of solidarity networks due to financial constraints that have even favored the emergence of some right-wing agendas in the south. These same collectives also condemned the cooperation-led insti-

tutionalization of social movements, in the same way that feminists have criticized this since its origins in recent decades.

'Colonialism is a core business model in this capitalist, racist and patriarchal system – a system that feeds off exploitation and extraction. Cooperation operates within and alongside capitalism, and within this dynamic, any future decolonial cooperation will always be contradictory.' – From the *Struggles and joys* dialogue sessions (2022).

This context causes tension in cooperation work and responsibilities, which was made clear by decolonial and communitarian feminists who participated in the discussions, raising the question: What do these critical observations imply for cooperation, and in particular for cooperation based in the north?



1.2. SPECIFIC MECHANISMS FOR REVIEW IN EVERYDAY COOPERATION

What role does cooperation play in the decolonizing mission? What possibilities and limitations does it have? What contradictions are associated with the notion of 'decolonial cooperation' and how can we overcome them?

Between 2024 and 2025, the main donor countries took a step backwards, curtailing a large part of Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding. Far from being from a critical, decolonial approach, it has instead deepened the dynamics of unequal power and north-south domination, pushing full reparations further out of reach. In a context where cooperation made civil society in the south financially dependent, these cuts are a direct, head-on attack against social movements. As a result, it is more urgent than ever to critically examine cooperation and find responsible solutions that foreground social movements and people who have been historically affected by colonial wounds.

'States don't stage revolutions; it's organizations that do, and it's the people, with autonomy, who can support a transformation process towards other ways of living.' – Adriana Guzmán, taken from the documentary *Descolonizar la cooperación y la práctica feminista* (2022).

This section addresses criticisms of specific mechanisms, practices, contradictions and limitations based on the experiences and requests of collectives and activists. It is based on the understanding that to achieve transformative change, responses should come from the political autonomy of the people and social movements of the south. It is also important to assess these criticisms and potential proposals, particularly in the current context where sudden funding cuts in international cooperation are adversely affecting social movements in the south.

'Some concerns about cooperation come from the idea that any action made by communities will generate an effect that will bring change. That's why it's important to assess if a transformation is beneficial or detrimental in multiple spheres.' Proyecto Poder during the Participatory Action Research process.



Financial power

The historical context reveals that at the heart of international cooperation's unequal dynamics lies the difference of wealth and resources concentrated in the north in contrast to southern countries. It is therefore understood that cooperation's existence is rooted in this wealth inequality.

Not only does the financial power of this inequality imply north-south hierarchies, but it also means that communities from the south are more dependent on northern resources. Recognizing that collectives and activists operate within a capitalist context, and face pressure to secure funding for their viability, well-being and care, it is important to understand how these economic dynamics can lead collectives to surrender political autonomy.

During the Participatory Action Research, participants expressed the following in reference to cooperation's funding entities: 'They make us economically dependent on their funding and that changes our roots, our principles of freedom (...) they give us no choice but to adapt to their agendas of "development and transformation".'

Epistemological power

'Colonialism entailed not just territorial, economic, and political violence but also epistemic and cultural violence. That is, colonialism erased or diminished longstanding Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Thus, decoloniality entails epistemic re-constitution and reparations: drawing on and centering alternative knowledge systems to reimagine the categories of thought and knowledge that underpin our social, economic, and political structures.' Oxfam (2022) [Decolonize! What does it mean?](#)

Eurocentrism is a fundamental component of colonial legacy, in which anything European (and American), Western and white is valued as superior to that of other regions. From the epistemic perspective, this also involves the domination of knowledge, the erasure of ancestral wisdom originating from the south, and its devaluation. In the documentary *Decolonizar la Cooperación*, in Potosí, Bolivia, anti-patriarchal communitarian feminist Jimena Tejerina (2022) narrates how international cooperation 'is a continuity (of colonization), giving us guidelines on how things should be, without considering that we, as people, have our own civilization and way of life'.

During the Political Dialogue session in 2022, Jen Rubio Florían (Ciguapa) highlighted how some people face barriers to accessing information, due to class and race biases in education structures under the model of northern domination over the south. She also observed how the colonial legacy not only erased community and ancestral knowledge, but it also prevents the very same people from accessing information and knowledge that colonialism values.

'With this system built on a historical narrative that romanticizes colonizers as adventurers and our ancestors as non-existent and savages (...) it reproduces and expands this worldview, but not before killing curiosity, diverse identities and ancestral knowledge.' – collective La Maricada in conversation with the Ephemeral Team (2023).

When adopting a decolonial approach, we must urgently ask **who produces the knowledge prioritized in cooperation, how it is produced, through which methodologies and places of enunciation, and, likewise, which types of knowledge are being ignored or erased.** We must also be critical of how, by creating epistemic hierarchy systems, civil society organizations are forced to give up their ways to adopt how cooperation, classic academia and the north build knowledge.

Language frameworks: 'Words become embodied'

Criticism of the power dynamics embedded in the language of cooperation was made in the same vein as critiques for epistemological power, particularly with regard to 1) the language of international cooperation that continues to legitimize dynamics that are deeply rooted in coloniality, and 2) the dynamics related to the co-optation of the language of social movements.

In a conversation between feminists Adriana Guzmán and Celenis Rodríguez during the [Political dialogue: cooperation, feminisms and decoloniality](#) session in 2022 (only available in Spanish), they expressed that neither cooperation nor the state could be decolonized, but that at the very least, the frameworks and categories used in cooperation should be urgently reviewed. **Adriana Guzmán said 'words become embodied'** and cooperation is largely based on language and practices that draw on frameworks that produce, reproduce and legitimize racism and colonialism. She also made an important reference to 'gender technocracy'¹⁰ and its lack of foresight to 'look at the structure [and] the economic, political, colonial,

racist system that is built upon bodies and territories’.

‘As with feminism, there is a high risk of co-opting movements, as well as cosmetic, surface-level changes rather than profound, radical transformation. Instead of decolonizing, the deep roots of the colonial world system and the prevailing hegemonic civilizing model – within which cooperation functions both as a tool and a vehicle – are covered up.’ – From the Ephemeral Team’s internal dialogues (2024).

Celenis Rodríguez also mentioned how the same language can be used by different institutions and people with completely different meanings, particularly when bodies do not experience coloniality in the same way. International cooperation must therefore be careful and radical when using language with a decolonial approach, and this approach must permeate all forms of analysis, interaction and action. That is, cooperation must take the same care when producing knowledge, interacting with grassroots collectives and organizations as well as power centers, and implementing projects. Accordingly, this criticism highlights that the narrative shift adopted by decolonial language must be accompanied by actions and a commitment to genuine transformation.

‘The popularity of decolonizing discourses has meant that its more revolutionary potential is often sidelined for reformist compromises. Individuals and institutions may often graft “decolonizing” on to any number of social justice initiatives, without engaging in the radical and liberating work necessary to undo and reimagine coloniality.’ Extract from Decolonize! What does it mean? (2022).

Matches: activists that work in the cooperation ecosystem

Who works in cooperation? There is no defined cooperation worker profile, as workers come from a myriad of cultural, academic and territorial backgrounds. However, there are bodies – often activists within cooperation – who are situated at a difficult crossroads of contradictions, tensions and struggles, typical of being part of cooperation when people come from doing activism in social movements. Some have called this phenomenon the ‘professionalization of activism’.

Before starting to discuss this reflection, it is important

to remember the precarious conditions of activists in the south. In the 2023 event, participants shared with the Ephemeral Team this situation that shouts in their weary bodies, their economies in danger, their mental health – further strained by the additional working days they undertake through activism, often gratuitously and under undignified conditions. This is the result of a neoliberal system that prides itself on the community care they provide, while they become poorer.

While this happens, international cooperation is interested in hiring feminist activists who are close to the grassroots and contribute to shaping the political thinking of the institutions, offering decent salaries that improve people’s quality of life. On the one hand, this has improved activists’ conditions. Similarly, it means that social movements can have allies within cooperation, as these individuals put forward proposals grounded in the logic of social activism, seeking to benefit their political origins. In a conversation with Celenis Rodríguez, Adriana Guzmán (2022) suggested that although colonial institutions are not changing, the individuals working in them can change and that could have a positive, less colonial impact.

On the other hand, the neoliberal work dynamics that this professionalization of activism entails usually turns activist talent into administrative profiles under dynamics of bureaucracy. This leads to the institution being legitimized, as it appears to work closely with feminists, yet without the original political content of feminist activism.

What happens to these individuals who have decolonial political convictions and who work in these spaces? The internal dialogue in 2024 and the Ephemeral Team’s experience showed that these contradictions often have a personal and occupational cost for those who endure these tensions. The Decolonizing Narratives document produced in 2023 from the Participatory Action Research mentioned that it is ‘difficult to strike a balance between affiliation and livelihood, strongly influenced by cooperation’s requirements’.

This panorama of contradictions – involving restrictive cooperation practices while hiring activists; efforts to change the system from within; and navigating two very different worlds (the institution and their own local activism), while needing to earn a living in this neoliberal modernity – leads to a scenario that this text does not resolve, but intentionally leaves open

for further discussion. Even though they are the very individuals encouraging us to reflect on 'how to decolonize cooperation', these contradictions have caused burnout and exhaustion and, consequently, have dampened the activist fire needed to sustain their work within a neoliberal system.

Formal power structures

Building on the previous point, examining who makes up international cooperation institutions, where they are based, and to whom they are accountable, reveals the top-down power structures that characterize them. Based on the premise that international cooperation arises from solidarity, the anti-patriarchal communitarian feminist Diana Vargas (2022) critically stated **'solidarity occurs among equals. Are we equal? Are we considered equal? How can we talk about solidarity when you know that you're not equal?'**

This contradiction highlighted by Diana Vargas encourages us to reconsider cooperation's narrative and question the power practices that do not allow for equal partnerships. For example, senior and decision-making roles are usually held by people from or based in the north. Furthermore, professionalized people who have a formal Western education tend to be favored, while in the south, staff are given roles involving more work and administrative tasks. This means that decision-making and practice building have an implicit bias where hegemony is promoted in everyday actions. Although there are explicit – and at times brave – efforts to counteract this modus operandi, the construction of a northern hegemony within cooperation calls for a genuine rethinking of the hierarchies that are established and reproduced, as well as the interests these dynamics serve and whom they benefit.

This is a clear example of the previously mentioned concept of 'technocracy'¹⁰, related to the idea of 'neutrality', an idea that stems from the coloniality of knowledge, which renders other forms of knowledge,¹¹ invisible and marginalizes them to maintain power structures. It represents a north-south relationship, which is linked to ways of understanding the world in

a deeper, more complex way. Similarly, there is an idea that 'administrative' is more valuable than political, and partnerships tend to be in capital or important cities rather than more remote communities.

At the same time, power inequalities are also apparent in international cooperation and organizations. When cooperation is present in the north and the south, the northern offices tend to hold decision-making authority and dictate the political agendas to southern offices (particularly when a local person is employed in them). As a consequence, the lack of agency and limited ability of southern offices – staffed by local personnel and connected to movements of the south – to set their own agendas contributes to these unequal power structures.

Neoliberal context

A fundamental criticism towards international cooperation's usual modus operandi is how its neoliberal logic represents a bureau-repressive burden¹² for activists and collectives. The logic behind fund implementation, usually based on short-term project logic, time constraints, endless bureaucratic tasks, and legal and tax obligations stemming from mistrust stifle organizations' transformative political capacity.

Under this neoliberal logic, international cooperation prioritizes financial support and working with larger organizations and institutions that can bear these bureaucratic burdens, instead of rethinking the time frames. Similarly, civil society organizations are expected to take on this bureaucratic burden and be legally registered in their countries to be eligible for funding (a condition that can often represent an economic burden and political risk).

These requirements also arise in neoliberal time frames: short-term projects and quick results all within the timelines dictated by the global north's tax year. As the decolonial feminist cooperative Sukuamis underscored, time frames should be slower-paced: 'we may go slowly, but we go far'.

¹⁰ Feminist thinkers and activists like María Galindo have employed this term to criticize the technocratization of feminism by aligning it with a neoliberal agenda, linked with the institutionalization and NGO-ization of social movements.

¹¹ The coloniality of knowledge is a concept formulated by decolonial theorist Anibal Quijano, which analyses how the hegemonic way of dealing with knowledge is Western-centric. He also discusses the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being.

¹² 'Bureau-repression' is a direct translation of the Spanish term 'burorrepresión'. It refers to bureaucratic coercion, i.e. a kind of 'coartación' (a term used to refer to the process of purchasing freedom from the enslaver) or the involuntary input of energy, skills and time in administrative processes, which is disproportionate to the accountability and transparency needed for an initiative.

'We see a constant recurrence of colonial practices within cooperation agendas for development related to the organization, which demands outcomes without considering the actual times required for the actions at a local level. Nor is any improvement in wages considered.' – From the Participatory Action Research with Asociación de Mujeres Defensoras de la Vida.

criteria are not consistent with southern needs. La Negra Albornoz illustrated this point by explaining that working on individual matters is 'cooperation's fantasy', given that problems are intertwined and prioritizing 'trending' matters sidelines other intersecting issues.

Agendas

Since international cooperation was first fostered at the United Nations conferences and priorities were dictated by the World Bank, it has tended to create agendas using a top-down approach. Celenis Rodríguez noted that the practice of imposing agendas comes from a belief that northern actors are more capable than those in the south, implying that the needs of the territories are not heard and the differences of contexts are not understood. Agenda priorities are established behind desks in the global north without consulting the people affected by those decisions. As such, participants have seen that social movements are unable to have political autonomy if they cannot decide on their own agendas.

In the words of a Participatory Action Research participant: 'money alters our roots; it backs us into a corner'. This responds to the concerns that when funding is received – conditioned by northern political agendas – the very essence of the social movement shifts. Faced with funding dependence, organizations are forced to mold their focus, political visions and objectives to what is currently being prioritized or 'trending' on international cooperation agendas.

'[Cooperation actors] have the ability to co-opt struggles, and they have to recognize that they're not a social movement; they have to support and can support social movements without institutionalizing them, but there's a tendency to co-opt discourse and create trends.' – Adriana Guzmán in the documentary *Decolonizar la cooperación y la práctica feminista* (2022).

During the Political Dialogue session of 2022, Alejandra Lozano expressed how civil society is divided into sectors based on the agendas of multilateral organizations. For example, for a long time, gender and human rights agendas were considered in isolation from matters related to land and climate rights. Social movements need to construct coordinated agendas that respond to the political visions of their territories, meaning that agendas divided into sectors according to northern

PART 2. ACTION-PROPOSALS: lessons learned

2.1. ONE FRAMEWORK AND HORIZON: REPARATIONS (THE PROPOSAL)

Reparations! The wisdom of the communitarian feminists from Bolivia, Celenis Rodríguez, and the members of Latin American Group of Research, Training and Feminist Action (GLEFAS) all debated a question that had been circulating at Oxfam Latin America since the Ephemeral Team started talking about these issues: How should the relationship between social movements and cooperation be today? Reparations begin with recognizing the harm caused, as discussed in the previous section. Then comes action, which for this case and based on experience, should focus on improving relationships between cooperation and social movements.

Recognizing the causes of inequality is to acknowledge that they are upheld in the colonial-patriarchal order, which underscores the gravity of continuing to produce, reproduce and legitimize tools of this system. The appropriation of territories and bodies, alongside the unprecedented concentration of wealth – now more than ever – is precisely as depicted in *Takers not Makers* (2025).



'Inequality is therefore a colonial burden. In Abya Yala, domination and exploitation are intersected by anthropocentric delirium, "race", class and the patriarchal and cis-heterosexual regime.' – From the Ephemeral Team on Oxfam LAC's blog Decolonize Cooperation? (2022)

So, for Celenis Rodríguez, reparations, in the stricter sense of the word, represent a long and arduous task. This echoes the opinion shared by Adriana Guzmán (2022) in that she believes that decolonizing cooperation is impossible, but the people within cooperation can change: 'The structures are not indestructible because the people on the inside can bring about change.' Since 2022, the Ephemeral Team has wanted to explore the following question: How can reparations be made?

'After 500 years of colonial invasion, we have yet to see a cooperation pathway that has been able to undo all the colonial wrongs. So reparations involve how this money (obtained from extractivism) is generated and managed to ensure we don't slip back to old ways. It has to at least help us fight with dignity to recover what we want and dream of from our place.' – Jimena Tejerina in the documentary Decolonizar la cooperación y la práctica feminista (2022).

Analyzing the geographies of cooperation has also been vital to the Ephemeral Team. During the 2024 'Lessons learned, struggles and joys' dialogue sessions, the participating groups agreed that power and resources are unequally distributed within cooperation between the south and the north. Furthermore, they stated that it is essential that those representing the global south and the peripheries play an effective role in global decision-making. Examining the internal hierarchies is urgent, so as to prevent reproducing colonial dynamics, particularly in the south and peripheries. Priority should be given to including more Black, Indigenous and

Mestizo people, with a shift in the paradigm of representation, ensuring that this is not just a surface-level quota model with no political purpose. Furthermore, administrative processes must be made accessible for all contexts without being based on northern requirements or constantly treating partners, co-partners or allies with suspicion.¹³

Outwardly, for intermediary NGOs, participants raised the need for donors to stop demanding bureaucratization and partners internally imposing requirements as a buffer, rather than requiring these measures directly

from organizations. This would reduce the bureaucratic burden and forge new bonds, particularly with Black, Indigenous and Mestizo movements and networks in the global south.

This criticism towards the bureaucratic burden may be controversial, as practicing and valuing transparency and accountability are fundamental for partners. However, in parallel, they are frameworks typical of top-down power dynamics where social movements are disadvantaged. Accountability processes focus on donors' requirements and how organizations that allocate funding ensure their compliance. However, social movements are often not included when answering the question 'To whom should cooperation be accountable?'

From a decolonial approach, donors must also be held accountable and accept responsibility if funds are linked to requirements, interference or interventions in the emancipatory processes of social movements.

Responsibility, transparency and accountability are undisputed values, but the frameworks, processes and paradigms in which they are implemented must also shift to work towards reparations.

'What is the very least that can be done [by cooperation actors]? Firstly, being aware of the role the work they're doing plays in the disaster that their own countries or the entities they're working for have caused. They should ask themselves, "What political position am I in with respect to this?" Then, they need to work more on listening and ask themselves, "What are the people who are there saying? What's the dynamic of these problems?"' – Celenis Rodriguez during the Political dialogue: Cooperation, feminisms and decoloniality (2022).

¹³ Working 'with suspicion' towards partners refers to partnerships based on mistrust, marked by assumptions of fund misuse and the imposition of excessive expenditure control measures.

2.2. POSSIBLE ACTIONS, URGENT ACTIONS

The critical views of thinkers, collectives and activists, and the group discussions and experiences witnessed by the Ephemeral Team gave rise to the following series of provocations as a roadmap for reparations. Revisiting what was mentioned at the start, rather than a definitive conclusion, what follows here responds to the question: What strategies can be implemented from within the trenches to support decolonization?

'[...] We don't want to say that cooperation should be demonized and social organizations should forgo all funding. On the contrary, our particular interest is that organizations and communities question and reclaim their power with regard to cooperation agencies that, although rooted in Western coloniality, must be self-critical of their interference in the territories [...].' Proyecto Poder during the Participatory Action Research.

These proposals do not aim to resolve the contradictions inherent to cooperation and coloniality. Instead, they put forward pathways that foreground the needs, voices and concerns of global south collectives, always with reparations in view. These proposals will continue to evolve and be discussed beyond the realms of this document. Therefore, it is essential to consider them a starting point and not as something that marks the end of this learning process.

From the internal 'Lessons learned, struggles and joys' dialogue sessions, the group agreed on the importance of not creating false expectations - both internally and externally - regarding the scope of a decolonial perspective in this context. It is not coherent or transparent to say that cooperation is going to 'become decolonized'. Instead, it is important to accept responsibility and discuss the impacts that cooperation has on social movements. Once again, commitments must be made to mitigate some of those impacts.

The group also discussed how important it is for cooperation to allocate material resources, time, funding and staff for the decolonial 'objective'. The following possible and urgent actions must not only be pursued on an individual level, but become politicized agendas within the institutions as an international, coordinated effort.

Unrestricted funds and redistribution of resources

One of the most important learnings has been recognizing how coloniality is found in everyday cooperation dynamics and the political implications this carries for the work of social movements. This is the nature of the most common funding type in cooperation, highlighting the need to create long-term, unrestricted, grassroots funding models. Priority agendas from the south should receive unrestricted funding.

Similarly, when considering collectives' material needs, it becomes evident that priority must be given to funding that enables people within social movements to meet their basic needs and sustain their livelihoods. Project logics often do not cover the operational or salary costs of the people running the projects. To this end, the budget ceilings assigned to these categories must be reviewed.

Furthermore, proposals were made as to how flexible funding can also be directed to promote the political autonomy and independence of collectives. The grassroots collectives interviewed in 2023 told Oxfam that investing in funds that generate sustainability would enhance their autonomy and make them less reliant on international cooperation. This proposal is particularly relevant in a context of reduced funds, centered in promoting long-term responsible cooperation agreements. This was suggested as an alternative to transition away from dependence on cooperation without abrupt changes that could harm social movements.

Building on trust: forging partnerships

These learnings underscore the importance of implementing 'trust-based' relationships. This type of relationship means putting an end to microaggressions, paternalistic attitudes, patronizing behavior and collaboration rooted in suspicion. This can be achieved by breaking down epistemic, power and knowledge hierarchies and creating connections based on equality and autonomy.

'The relative position in the cooperation system lends a certain degree of power that is not accessible from other positions. We need to take a transparent, honest look at power, how it is determined, and in what aspects of our work it appears. That way we can obtain the elements needed to encourage reflection – introspectively and on an organizational level – that will enable us to explore changes.' International Cooperation for Global Justice (2025).

The need to build trust-based partnerships responds to the criticism on power dynamics and surveillance generated by top-down accountability mechanisms, often due to donors' demands, and which require a paradigm shift. As was discussed during the 2024 internal 'Struggles and Joys' dialogue session, there is a need to 'adopt a different kind of courageous dialogue' with donors to be able to start building on an equal footing.

From a paradigm where cooperation's role is to repair, accompany and 'acuerpar' (or embody), trust-based partnerships are fundamental. For the territorial communitarian feminist, Lorena Kab'nal, who has been an important figure for the Ephemeral Team, 'acuerpamiento' (or embodiment) is a political act 'of personal awareness that becomes shared'. This therefore represents a horizon in which partnerships are grounded in political complicity.

Shouldering bureaucratic pressures

As was previously mentioned, the bureaucratic and administrative burden shouldered by organizations and collectives is a clear representation of the colonial legacy of power dynamics and the neoliberal logic present in international cooperation. In addition to the proposals already made concerning flexible funding that adapts to collectives, other pathways were suggested to mitigate the bureau-repression apparent in current funding dynamics, while always guaranteeing transparency and accountability.

One such example is the role that international NGOs can play. The collectives that Oxfam met in February 2023 also suggested that these organizations have the infrastructure and staff to buffer administrative processes and bureaucratization. Similarly, the collectives believed that international organizations are well-positioned to pressure donors and ease the pressure that donors place on civil society collectives and organizations. This is also applicable within the norths and souths of the very organizations: those offices further north (not so much geographically but in terms of power) should absorb as much of the adminis-

trative burden as possible so that staff do not end up shouldering it, as explained in the section on burnout.

The following quote is from the 2024 internal dialogue sessions: 'Organizations like ours [Oxfam] in the cooperation ecosystem must challenge donors to rethink how they benefit from extraction, in collaboration with our allies, and how they should transform some of their demands in favor of the autonomy and sustainability of organizations'. This proposal considers how to use the existing structures to benefit the needs of global south collectives. Understanding that restructuring is a long-term process, such proposals consider that existing structures can be used to balance the current power dynamics as a short- or mid-term measure.

Protecting movements and social struggles

Throughout this process, the question 'What is the added value of international organizations?' came up many times. Collectives – particularly those in politically complex contexts – expressed that both donors and intermediaries can play a caring role. They can use their structures, institutional nature and international presence to help protect global south collectives from anti-democratic threats. In contexts of shrinking civic space, collectives demand that international organizations and donors act as an umbrella to protect them against the state-driven repression that grassroots collectives could endure without resources to defend themselves.

This work should not respond to an isolated agenda or the institutional benefit of the NGO, but rather serve the protection and autonomy of the organizations and collectives that show up with their bodies to defend lives, land, common goods and rights. In view of an ever-growing fundamentalist and fascist wave, their voices – not others speaking on their behalf – must be heard loud and clear in the international arena and in global spaces of power and decision-making.

During the Political Dialogue session in 2022, Maria Claudia 'La Negra' Alborno and Alejandra Lozano emphasized the key importance of international cooperation agencies and international NGOs in influencing the state and local governments as interlocutors for social movements. Given their institutional nature, they are closer to governmental entities where they can advocate, influence and position agendas that mobilize movements. They can also act as a bridge, giving activists, collectives and civil society access to decision-makers.

Redistributing power

Given the unequal distribution of power within international cooperation that – as was previously mentioned – is predominantly led by people of the north in the north, reforms must be considered. It was also suggested that hiring local personnel should be preferred over ‘expats’ in southern offices to promote equal working conditions. Furthermore, in the internal ‘Struggles and joys’ dialogue sessions in 2024, participants proposed that resources should be allocated to personnel responsible for agendas that prioritize decolonial, anti-racist, feminist initiatives.

In this vein, they emphasized that thematic lines of work must reflect intersectional needs and policy commitments. Organizations and groups must be able to have open communication and conversations about their concerns with donors and international organizations. Another way that power can be redistributed is by giving activists, civil society and collectives co-authorship. People with whom collaboration takes place must be recognized as such – as collaborators – on an equal footing with international cooperation entities.

Above all, power relationships must change so that civil society organizations and collectives can play a central role in decision-making. The political perspectives and needs of collectives and organizations must focus on awarding funds and negotiating funding conditions. In the internal dialogue sessions in 2024, participants emphasized the importance of promoting reciprocity and complicity, and abandoning co-construction dynamics grounded on suspicion and risk, patronizing behavior and paternalistic attitudes.

Epistemic justice

Revisiting the criticism concerning epistemic coloniality, the importance of including ways of learning and knowledge building from territories was highlighted. This comment encourages a review of the logic of indicators that serve only the project dynamics, and creating circular processes, where assessment processes are also useful and necessary for collectives. Those participating in grants should be able to define their own metrics, based on their own ways of systematizing learning, and should also participate in defining the agreements.

During the Participatory Action Research, the collectives shared the following epistemic justice approach: ‘We don’t brainwash. We humbly work with people who feel and think. We recognize the potential

and support from these communities and nourish ourselves from the multidisciplinary professions and perspectives ready to question reality,’ underlining the importance of recognizing different learning processes and sources of wisdom.

Similarly, the grassroots collectives interviewed in 2023 speak of changing the logic of epistemological extractivism. Participants mentioned the need for fair compensation and recognition of the knowledge, information, wisdom, life lessons and experiences of people from the south. Cooperation has a moral responsibility to compensate the communities with which it works, based on mutual agreement and equality. Similarly, co-optation of the decolonial language used by social movements should be avoided, especially when there are no material or political initiatives to back it up.

Historical consciousness

We need to understand that historical consciousness is not a ‘complementary’ symbolic activity or a product to conclude projects, but a political, ancestral, community practice that recognizes experiences, resistance and violence so that they can uphold defending life and territory. Processes of historical consciousness must be led by the affected communities and collectives. The role of cooperation must be to serve these initiatives, creating conditions for local voices to discuss what is remembered, how it is remembered and how that consciousness is safeguarded.

Mid- and long-term funding is therefore necessary to support meeting spaces, archives and collective healing, as well as the material conditions that such processes require. Historical consciousness must be recognized as a means to repair past harms and protect against ongoing violence, and is directly linked to the defense of human rights and territory. At the same time, cooperation has a responsibility to value and support diverse formats of historical consciousness beyond written reports. Decolonizing how issues are documented means accepting that these ways embody situated and powerful knowledge, which must not be considered secondary to bureaucratic or communicational standards designed in the global north. Before calling for visibility and public products, cooperation must support the assessment of the specific risks that communities face when they raise their voices: criminalization, stigmatization, physical and digital violence and attacks on leaders.

Lastly, cooperation must critically examine its practices, questioning what stories it promotes, who is foregrounded and who is made a footnote. Committing to decolonial collective historical consciousness means refraining from using it for publicity purposes and always undertaking to return the products, archives and decisions to the communities that created them.

Changing the narrative

During the 2024 internal 'Struggles and joys' dialogue sessions, participants stated the need to develop a narrative that questions the coloniality of cooperation and considers new pathways towards reparations and redistribution. As long as cooperation does not achieve reparations and redistribution, it continues to function as a tool of coloniality. Therefore, it is neither logical nor transparent to claim that cooperation can 'become decolonialized'. Such a narrative could lead to false expectations, both internally within cooperation and for social movements, which would be counter-productive in the long term.

As an alternative, based on the discussions and drawing on Ochy Curiel's wisdom, changing the narrative towards reparations was proposed. Inspired by the decolonial approach, a narrative of responsibility must be adopted to repair some of the effects that coloniality has had on social movements in the south. This can be achieved by working with a critical consciousness of the impacts that cooperation has on social movements in each context and being committed to counteract some of them.

'We must change the terms of the discourse. The very term "cooperation" is problematic, as it implies, from the outset, power relations, albeit disguised as altruism and international solidarity. I've proposed that instead of talking about cooperation, we should talk about reparations, because international cooperation has the resources that it does precisely because they were stolen from this continent through colonialism.'
– From Ochy Curiel's opinion piece (2022).

PART 3. Key concepts: from colonialism to decolonial feminism



When approaching the matter of 'decoloniality and cooperation', it is essential to consider these key concepts, their origins, the nuances that accompany them, and - above all - the knowledge, situated experiences and communities that have developed them as forms of critique and from their resistance. The history of decoloniality is very rich; great theorists like Maria Lugones, Aníbal Quijano and Enrique Dussel laid foundations that have also been used and expanded upon by decolonial feminists. Below is a brief glossary of key concepts used throughout this text, based on definitions found in the documents consulted for this review.

- In its report *Takers not Makers*, Oxfam defines **colonialism** as: 'the process of physical, economic and/or political control, often through violence, of one country over another territory through settlement, economic domination or political rule'.
- **Coloniality** therefore refers to the 'colonial relations [that] continue to shape and ground our present-day political, economic, and social knowledge systems', as presented in *Decolonize! What does it mean?*
- Colonizing entities legitimized colonization through a so-called '**civilizing mission**', during which colonized groups were dehumanized and hierarchies were imposed to justify their domination. This legacy is evident in 'white savior' dynamics and in the language that permeates international cooperation by means of top-down and paternalistic references.
- Revisiting the lessons learned and knowledge demonstrated during the Participatory Action Research, **decoloniality** in resistance to colonialism and its colonial legacy can be understood as a 'process of deconstructing the power relations that we have inherited from colonialism'. Galfisa also shared that the decolonial approach should promote counter-hegemonic action, overthrow power and aim to change society.
- Academically, decolonial theory suggests decentralizing white, Eurocentric epistemologies, having developed a body of key knowledge from the south to provide context for what is present here. At the same time, Lorena Kab'nal taught us that communities challenge academia and, in contrast, use the term '**descolonialidad**' rather than '*de-colonialidad*' in Spanish.
- Ochy Curiel (2022) refers to **decolonial feminism** as a transformative, radical proposal in post-colonial countries, which draws on own experiences, allowing them to be questioned and, at the same time, modified and changed to create a world that is not patriarchal, racist, heterosexist or classist.

PART 4. Final reflections: sitting with discomfort in a burned-out community

GIVEN THE ROLE THAT COOPERATION SHOULD PLAY IN THE DECOLONIZING MISSION, WHAT HAS THIS GROUP LEARNED?

After four years of explorations, external and internal dialogues, and a continuous process of listening, learning and sitting with the tension of having burned out in cooperation, the Ephemeral Team shall now present the essence of what was learned:

- **Embodying contradiction.** Firstly, 'decolonial cooperation' is a contradiction in itself, as cooperation stems from a colonial legacy. Exploring decoloniality within cooperation, cannot therefore raise false expectations. The narrative must therefore focus on the responsibility for the colonial legacy, and fair and deserving reparations be made to the social movements of the south.
- **Embarking on the journey:** healing the colonial wound. The fundamental lesson to be learned from this is that international cooperation must play a key role in this process of reparation. This must arise from acknowledging the harm caused to social movements due to this colonial legacy, and undertaking reparations that foreground communities from the south, as well as their thoughts and feelings, their efforts, their struggles and their political autonomy.
- **Understanding the coloniality of power, being and knowledge.** Coloniality must be understood as a civilizing project that affects and permeates everything that is done, the way in which the world is understood and valued, and shapes how it is organized collectively.
- **Using discomfort as a guide towards the south.** We all need to be able to sit with the discomfort of the contradictions and tensions associated with these processes. Not only is it inevitable, but it is also necessary in order to build paths towards reparations. Discomfort drives initiatives, partnerships, learnings and future pathways that will lead to the demands of social movements.
- **Courage is key to addressing urgent matters.** Reparations require a profound, long-term transformation of cooperation, yet there are urgent, medium-term actions that can responsibly address this colonial legacy. They focus on responding to the demands and needs of southern collectives, and can only be achieved with **courage and political commitment, through words and actions.**
- **Words become embodied.** One of cooperation's most immediate responsibilities is to adopt narratives and language frameworks that question its colonial legacy, power structures and inherent 'civilizing mission'. This includes moving away from language like 'development', 'beneficiaries' and 'aid'. Once again the place of enunciation becomes central: cooperation does not speak from an abstract neutrality, it speaks from a voice of power.

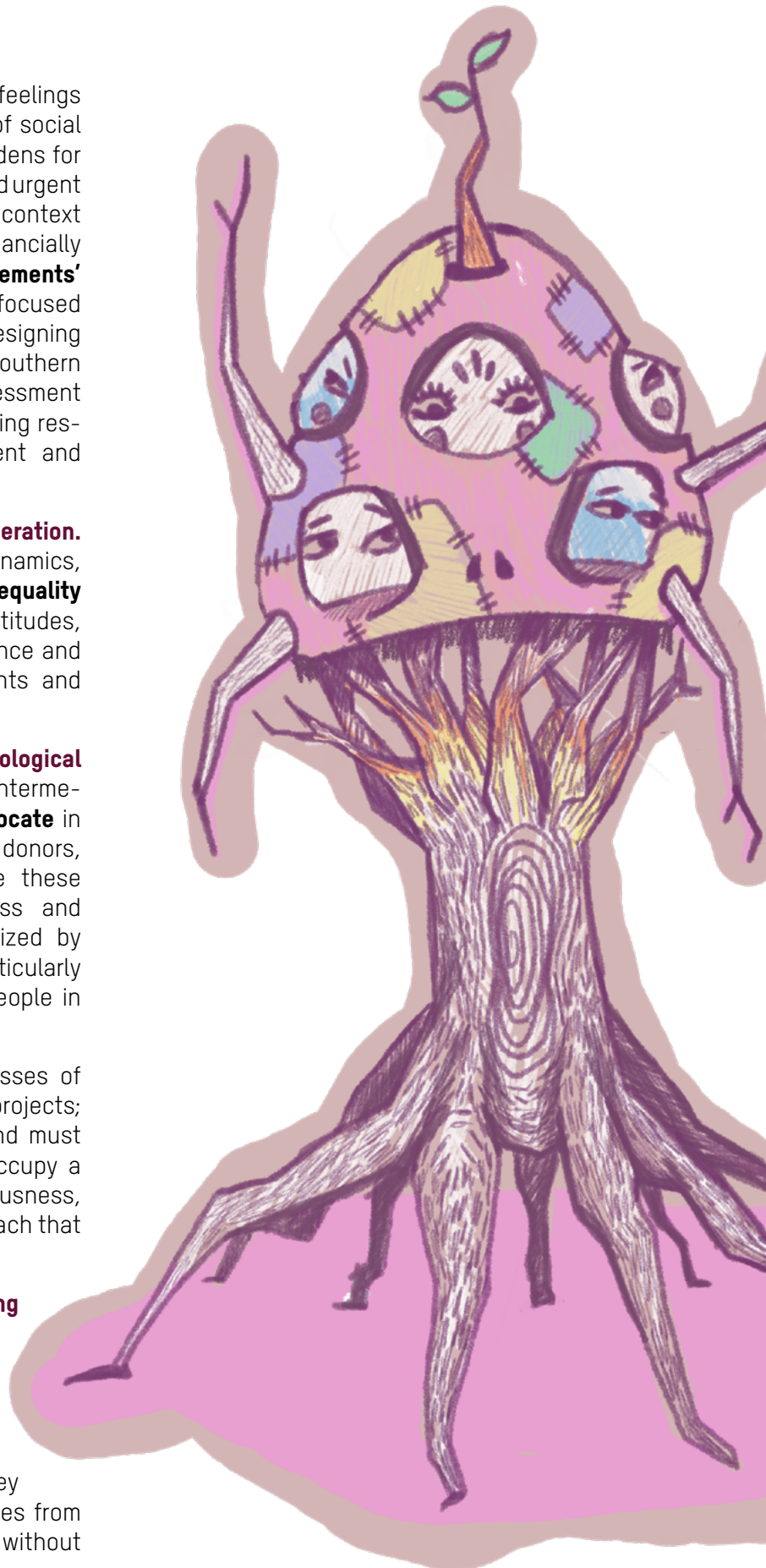
• **Radical autonomy:** freeing thoughts and feelings from bureaucracy. The NGO-ization processes of social movements are one of the current colonial burdens for which international cooperation has a primary and urgent responsibility. This is particularly urgent in a context where cooperation has been returned to financially dependent social movements. **Reclaiming movements' political autonomy** means dismissing project-focused logic, debureaucratizing grant agreements, designing unrestricted, flexible funds and allowing southern activists to dictate their own agendas and assessment and learning processes, with all parties accepting responsibility for accountability for empowerment and transformation.

• **A genuinely equal horizon for cooperation.** To deconstruct North–South colonial dynamics, cooperation must forge **relationships built on equality and trust** with social movements. Paternalistic attitudes, epistemological patronizing, mistrust, surveillance and suspicion of collectives in partnerships, grants and agreements must be left behind.

• **Combating the patriarchal political-epistemological neutrality.** International organizations and intermediaries have the role and **responsibility to advocate** in multilateral organizations, public and private donors, and other cooperation agencies to promote these decolonial principles. The decolonial process and reparative transformation must be characterized by political courage: 'neutrality' must be buried, particularly when accompanying social movements and people in contexts of violence and repression.

• **Past struggles and possible futures.** Processes of historical consciousness are not the product of projects; they are political practices of communities and must be community-led. Social movements must occupy a central role in processes of historical consciousness, and cooperation must adopt a decolonial approach that foregrounds their voices.

• **You cannot sow or reap without first working the land.** Sitting with the discomfort of 'decoloniality and cooperation' starts by examining international organizations and cooperation bodies. There is therefore a need to reconsider how they are organized, how power and resources are distributed, how they care for the people who sustain these struggles from within, and how they care for those who care without letting them reach **burnout**.



Special acknowledgements

We would like to give special thanks to all our colleagues, friends and allies, those who are no longer here and those who continue to put their heart and soul into this arduous, lengthy, uncomfortable and challenging work. It may feel like a tiny grain of sand in the middle of the desert, but it is proof that our resistance is part of our militant and activist fire.

Many thanks for offering your time and energy, even when it was not directly part of your responsibilities. Thank you to all those who were and are part of the Ephemeral Team (which we are pleased was not so ephemeral) for swimming against the tide and keeping the flame alight.

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