



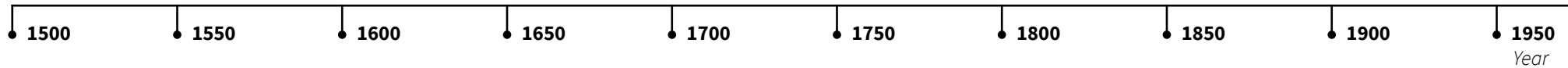
Decolonisation of development cooperation

Part 1 - Tracing the colonial roots of development cooperation: a brief history

This future brief – the first in a trilogy on the decolonisation of the development sector – takes a historical approach. We will uncover how the colonial project was intimately connected to the origins of development cooperation by tracing the interlinkages between colonialism and development. In doing so, this brief lays the historical foundations necessary to understand the present and move ahead towards a decolonised future.

The French Colonies, Cover of a school notebook by Georges Dascher, circa 1900

Part I: The origins of development cooperation and its interlinkages with the colonial project



What is decolonisation?

Initially, the word decolonisation was used to describe the process of former colonies achieving independence. However, in years that followed until the present, the legacies of colonialism can still be seen and felt in language, thought, relationships, economic and social inequalities. Thus, today decolonisation refers to a complex, all-encompassing transformation: a cultural shift that reveals and challenges systemic injustices and mindsets that are rooted in colonial history.

Late 15th – early 19th century: Transatlantic slave trade and the roots of underdevelopment

- [The Atlantic slave trade: What too few textbooks told you](#)
- [Impact of the slave trade – Through a Ghanaian lens](#)
- [The Long-term effects of Africa's slave trades](#)

In the late 15th century European merchants began transporting enslaved Africans across the Atlantic ocean to the Americas. While slave trading was not new and happened all over the world, the transatlantic trade in particular had far-reaching and devastating consequences: Lasting for four centuries, it demolished pre-existing inter-African trade relations; it drained the continent's labour reserves[1]; and the development of African and American economies and societies stagnated. In Europe, by contrast, industrialisation ensued in rapid pace, securing the continent's economic supremacy. Parallel to this economic effect, the slavetrade also left its ideological mark: To the European mind Africans and other

non-Western peoples came to be perceived as inferior, subaltern, a commodity.[2] Thus, the slave trade birthed the conditions of underdevelopment, which, compounded by later historical events, would eventually create the need for the development industry.[3]

19th – mid 20th century: Abolition of slavery and the advent of colonial rule

- [Colonialism. Global development's painful origins](#)
- [Uncomfortable silences: anti-slavery, colonialism and imperialism](#)
- [How the end of Atlantic slavery paved a path to colonialism](#)

The first links between development cooperation and the colonial project can be traced to the period between the 19th and mid-20th centuries, marked by the abolition of slavery and the advent of industrial colonialism. While slavery was abolished at the onset of the 19th century, economic interests for cheap labour and raw materials, as well as racist ideologies, persisted. In addition to the economic interests underpinning the colonial project, these racist ideologies also contributed to the establishment of colonial rule, not least because they provided a legitimisation of Western supremacy.[4] Doctrines like the 'mission civilisatrice' and the 'White Man's burden' marked colonialism as morally justifiable, or even a moral obligation.[5] Non-Christian, non-Western, non-white peoples were labelled as 'barbaric' and 'uncivilised savages', placing Europeans on a pedestal as beacons of civilisation and progress.[6] This dichotomous language and thinking is one of the key legacies of colonialism, still leaving its mark in development practice today. A second legacy is an instrumentalist motive: While some people have defended colonialism by pointing to the benefits of

infrastructure and administrative systems for the colonised societies[7], these were clearly the necessary means to a colonial, exploitative end – instruments of and for the colonisers.[8]

World War II: the fall of colonialism and the rise of development cooperation

- [Blood and Tears: French Decolonisation](#)
- [Truman's Inaugural speech 1949](#)
- [The U.S. and Decolonization after World War II](#)

After the Second World War, the devastating socioeconomic consequences of the colonial project on colonised peoples and their communities became apparent for the world.[9] Coupled with the signing of the Atlantic Charter – which celebrated the principle of self-determination – the effects of colonialism fuelled the rise of nationalism in many colonies; leading to Indonesia's declaration of independence from the Dutch and the end of British rule in India.[10] Additionally, American President Harry Truman, in his 1949 inaugural speech, emphasized the importance of furthering the development and freedom of less privileged people. Against this backdrop, European colonial powers realised that they would have to take action to keep their empires intact. This action took the form of early development efforts, including welfare projects as well as projects focusing on the construction of infrastructure necessary for export economies.[11] Thus, in the post-war years development cooperation became the 'colonial problem solver'. Funds started flowing from European metropolises to the colonies under the condition that these funds were matched with funds from local colonial revenues. As this was a near impossible task for the impoverished colonies, they were forced to borrow heavily from European banks, deepening their dependence on Western powers.[12]

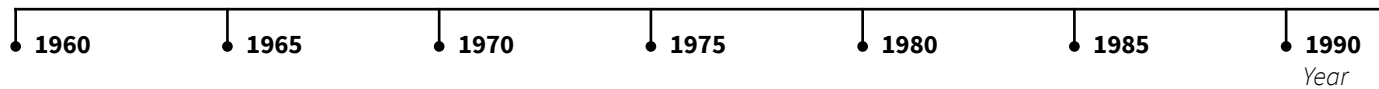
Formal decolonisation

When talking about the decolonisation of development cooperation, the era of formal decolonisation cannot be left unmentioned. In the years following WWII, colonialism quickly began to unravel. Under the pressure of indigenous nationalism, the economic and moral collapse of the imperial metropolis and the vacillations of the US, a rapid process of decolonisation followed. By the mid-1950s almost all of Asia and the Middle East had gained formal independence, and a decade later most African nations had followed suit. Most of these newly established nations embraced the goal of modern economic growth, putting forth self-determination as a condition for development. European occupation had, however, left most of the former colonies destitute and assistance was needed to prosper. To fill the gap, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the emergence and consolidation of the development aid agenda.

- [African decolonisation explained](#)
- [Origins, Evolution and Future of Global Development Cooperation](#)
- [BBC Witness History – Africa United 1963](#)

The first part of this brief has identified four colonial legacies that shaped the origins development cooperation: 1) dichotomous language and thinking to categorise people and societies; 2) instrumentalist motives underpinning development efforts; 3) unidirectional flows of money and resources from the metropolises to the colonies; and 4) the cultivation of relations of dependency. The second part investigates how these legacies have manifested in mainstream development practice from the 1960s onwards.

Part II: Tracing the colonial influences in development practice



1960s-70s: development as economic growth and the basic needs approach

- [Crash course Rostow's Stages of Growth Model](#)
- [Africa Post-Colonial Development: Fatoumata Waggeh at TEDxGallatin](#)
- [The Foreign Aid paradox](#)

The 1960s are often referred to as the 'first development decade', with Rostow's modernisation theory dominating the field. This theory led to a single, universally applicable narrative about economic development: All countries could and should modernise following a linear, five-stage model to reach the level of development exhibited by Western nations – i.e. the U.S. and Europe.[13] Throughout the 1960s development policies were informed by this model, assuming that the generated economic growth would automatically trickle down to all sectors and communities.[14] Western governments, dubbed as the 'First World', provided funding – in the form of loans, not gifts – for industrial and infrastructure projects to the so-called 'Third World'. [15] Thus, both the financial flows and the mindset central to the modernisation model were highly reminiscent of the colonial era: The First world – i.e. the former coloniser – has all the knowledge and embodies modernisation, which is the goal; the Third world – the previously colonised – must be educated and work to reach the modern ideal. [16] Yet, by the end of the decade it was clear Rostow's model was inadequate. The linear path to development did not work and the benefits of economic growth had not trickled down: malnutrition was common, infant mortality high, life expectancy low, illiteracy widespread, unemployment growing, income distribution skewed, and the gap between rich and poor countries was growing.[17]

1980s-1990s: From neoliberalism and structural adjustment to the rise of NGOs

- [What are Structural Adjustment Policies](#)
- [Life and Debt](#)
- [Poverty Inc](#)

As a direct result of the 1960s loan policies, the majority of recipient countries amassed exorbitant levels of debt.[18] Soon, they started defaulting on their repayment obligations, jeopardising international creditors such as banks, whose financial stability relied on getting paid back. Motivated by the need to safeguard international creditors – much like the colonial administrations' development efforts had prioritised their own stability, wealth and reputation – the IMF restructured the debt and started lending money to defaulting countries so they could continue repayment.[19] What was titled the 'Structural Adjustment Facility' was, in fact, a reincarnation of the failing aid programme: Instead of private investors and governments, the multilateral Bretton Wood institutions took the role of chief lenders to developing countries. In the decades that followed the evolution of development cooperation came to be dominated by the neoliberal agenda – with Structural Adjustment being just one its offshoots.

Developing countries were encouraged to privatise national industries; reduce the size of the public sector; and liberalise trade policies to create an enabling environment for the private sector.[20] These 'stabilisation' interventions became preconditions for receiving funds: That is, developing countries could only access aid by demonstrating progress towards implementing these adjustment policies.

Part II: Tracing the colonial influences in development practice

● 1995 ● 2000 ● 2005 ● 2010 ● 2015 ● 2020 ● Present
Year

Despite the efforts towards stabilisation in the 1980s, by the end of the decade debt levels were at an all-time high.[21] In response, the beginning of the 1990s saw the rise of a new approach to development; one that sought to be more collaborative, people-driven and localised. This new approach challenged traditional donor-recipient dynamics and promoted policies aimed at self-sufficiency, including micro-credits.[22] Additionally, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) became key development actors, offering an alternative for the failed state- and market-led approaches of the foregoing decades.[23] Parallel to their rise to prominence, however, NGOs also became subject to criticism. The dependence of NGOs on institutional and governmental donors was especially questioned: Were these relations, reminiscent of colonial ties, not compromising NGOs' accountability and links to grassroots organisations? [24]

2000s-present: sustainable development from the MDGs to the SDGs

- [Colonialism, Development Cooperation and the MDGs in Africa](#)
- [Neo-colonialism and Millennium Development Goals \(MDGs\) in Africa](#)
- [Sustainable Development Goals: time lapse to the future](#)

With the advent of the new millennium the scorecard of development progress revealed a grim reality: by the early 2000s, extreme poverty and starvation prevailed, and a large part of the global population still lacked access to education, drinking water and health care. In response, in the year 2000, the UN devised and implemented a set

of 8 objectives, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs offered a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and leading development institutions, forming an unprecedented effort to address world poverty.[25] Although the MDGs yielded significant results, especially towards reducing extreme poverty, sharp criticism was also heard: Many goals were not met, representatives from developing countries were not included in developing the objectives, and as a whole the goals failed to foster country ownership.[26]

To rectify the deficiencies and keep momentum going, the UN coined a new set of more ambitious and far-reaching objectives shortly after the MDGs expired: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As much as the SDGs were a continuation of the MDGs, they were also a departure from the latter in several ways. Firstly, in an attempt to foster a greater sense of country ownership, the process of developing the SDGs included a wide range of stakeholders from developing countries.[27] Additionally, the SDGs are universal in scope and application, meaning that developed countries also have to share responsibility in tackling the developmental challenges facing humanity.

This principle of shared responsibility, even if just in theory, is an attempt to break from the colonial legacy of classifying countries according to Western standards. Finally, the SDGs included interrelated goals covering human, environmental and economic dimensions. Although a greater sense of country ownership seems to have grown, so far, the SDGs have not managed to transform traditional donor-recipient dynamics.[28] Thus, the colonial legacy – in terms of relations, mindsets and practice – is still visible in present-day development efforts.

Conclusions

This brief has reviewed relevant historical events from the 15th century onwards to identify the legacies that international development cooperation inherited from the colonial project. Especially in the first three decades of post-imperial development cooperation (1960s-1980s) the interlinkages with the colonial project were still very clear. Starting in the 1990s, the sector made some first efforts – with varying success – to challenge these legacies and move towards a more equitable and collaborative approach.

As the final sections showcase, however, development cooperation still has a long way to go in ridding itself from colonial legacies. This brief is the first in a trilogy developed by Partos and The Broker that aims to support development practitioners in their quest to decolonise the sector. The second brief will pick up right where we left off: in the present. Keeping in mind the colonial legacies discussed here, we will uncover remnants of colonialism in today's development practice. Eventually, with a third brief that looks ahead, we hope to contribute to sustainable solutions for a decolonised future of development cooperation.

Colophon

This Future Brief on the Decolonisation of Development Cooperation is a product of the Partos Innovation Hub. Partos is the membership body for Dutch-based organisations working in development cooperation. The Partos Innovation Hub is a hybrid ecosystem where development professionals interact, create, inspire, undertake, work, learn and innovate together to become better able to navigate the future and accelerate change within themselves, their organisations, and in development cooperation.

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