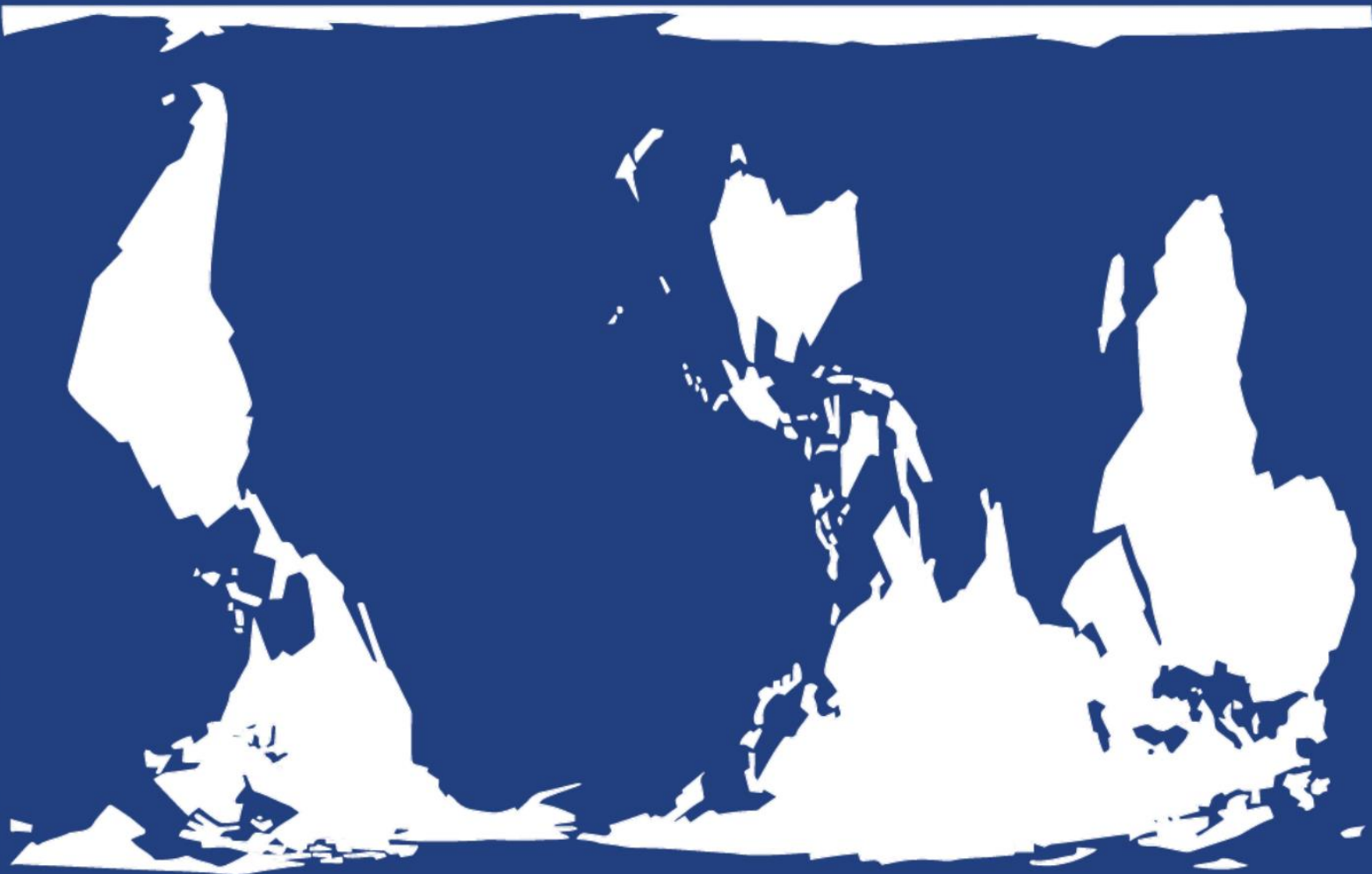


What is the role of Northern organisations in global justice advocacy?



Acknowledgements

This paper was written for the Gender and Development Network (GADN) by Sophie Efange, Yamina Ouldali and Jessica Woodroffe. We are extremely grateful to our interviewees and peer reviewers for sharing their reflections, thoughts, criticisms and dilemmas with us. We note that the views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of any one contributor, that involvement in the process of consultation does not imply endorsement and that GADN alone takes responsibility for any errors. We are also grateful to all the feminists and other activists who have shared their ideas with us over the years.

We particularly want to thank our **interviewees and peer reviewers**:

- Anita Nayar, Regions Refocus and Gender and Trade Coalition (GTC)
- Âurea Mouzinho, Global Alliance for Tax Justice (GATJ)
- Caroline Othim, formerly of Global Alliance for Tax Justice (GATJ)
- Constanza Pauchulo, International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW-AP)
- Crystal Simeoni, Nawi – Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective, *in a personal capacity*
- Dinah Musindarwezo, Womankind Worldwide
- Emilia Reyes, Equidad de Género
- Emma Burgisser, Christian Aid
- Gopika Bashi, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
- Joanna Pradela, International Women's Development Agency (IWDA)
- Dr Kamna Patel, Christian Aid
- Kate Donald, formerly of Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR)
- Katie Tobin, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)
- Mae Buenaventura, Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development (APMDD), *in a personal capacity*
- Marta Musić, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
- Memory Kachambwa, African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET)
- Noelene Nabulivou, DIVA for Equality
- Patricia Miranda, Red Latinoamericana por Justicia Económica y Social (LATINDADD)
- Pontso Mafethe, African Women's Development Fund (AWDF)
- Priyanthi Fernando, International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW-AP)
- Sachini Perera, Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice (RESURJ)
- Sanam Amin, independent consultant
- Sanyu Awori, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)

- Sehnaz Kiyamaz, Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and Women’s Major Group
- Shereen Essof, Just Associates (JASS)
- Shereen Talaat, Arab Watch Coalition
- Stefano Prato, Society for International Development (SID)
- Theo Sowa, independent consultant
- Tim Jones, Debt Justice UK
- Verónica Montúfar, Public Services International (PSI)
- zohra moosa, Mama Cash

This paper was edited by Megan Daigle and the cover page was designed by Nzilani Simu. The front cover is an inverted image of 'Gall-Peters projection'. The image portrays a more accurate scale of the world's continents and challenges the way that we view power relationships.

The paper is part of a project funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the content is the sole responsibility of the author, not the foundation.

Recommended citation: Gender and Development Network (December 2022).
 What is the role of Northern organisations in global justice advocacy?.
 Available at: <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/northern-organisations-global-justice-advocacy>.

The Gender and Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women’s rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women’s and girls’ rights.

Gender and Development Network

c/o ActionAid
 33–39 Bowling Green Lane
 London EC1R 0BJ
comms@gadnetwork.org
www.gadnetwork.org
 Registered charity no.
 1140272

For more information:

For more information about GADN, please email the GADN Coordinator at coordinator@gadnetwork.org

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Summary

As Northern international development organisations finally begin to acknowledge the colonial legacies that shape the sector, it is time for a critical examination of their roles in global justice advocacy which is intimately tied to this legacy. Here, based in part on contributions from 31 advocates worldwide, the Gender and Development Network (GADN) shares reflections, dilemmas and suggestions for change.

This discussion paper explores the roles and responsibilities of organisations that benefit from ‘Global North power and privilege’ – a term describing the advantages derived from affiliation with the Global North. It looks first at the ‘redistributive’ roles that many of these organisations aim to play, and the gains these can bring at the expense of those in the Global South, whether through exploitative communications, siphoning of funds or control of influencing spaces. Alternative ways of working are then discussed, from small steps to disruptive transformations, including the question of whether Northern organisations should ‘sunset’ by working towards closure while transferring their resources to organisations in the Global South.

But what we heard loud and clear was that actors with ‘Global North power and privilege’ have another more important ‘challenger’ role, and even a duty to hold their Northern governments to account for past and present harm. Priyanthi Fernando of International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific was unequivocal: *“It is because of the legacy of colonialism and its perpetuation that you must act, ‘action’ has to focus on using your privilege and your positionality to challenge those very institutions and processes”*.

To provoke further debate and fundamental organisational reforms, the paper concludes with a set of questions aimed at actors with ‘Global North power and privilege’ to re-examine their motivations, structures and ways of working.

For GADN, the process of writing this paper has surfaced as many questions as it has answered. Our challenge to ourselves, which we invite you to share, is to ensure that these reflections lead to real change in the way our organisations operate in global advocacy against injustices.



1. Introduction

The size and scope of international development organisations based in the Global North have increased dramatically over the last decades. Yet, this substantial expansion has not been accompanied by critical introspection, and subsequent course correction, on what such organisations' purpose should be – if indeed there is one. This is the central question that underpins this discussion paper, and it is particularly pertinent at a time when the Global North-based international development sector is finally being forced to reckon with colonialism, its ongoing legacies and the benefits these conferred to them. These, of course, are matters that many Global South-based organisations and actors have long lived with and interrogated.

Crucially, the interconnected structural oppressions of white supremacy, neo-colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism continue to shape the global context in which international development organisations operate. These structural power dynamics are fundamental to understanding how, and whether, these Global North-based organisations could contribute to tackling global injustices. With the power and privileges their location brings, this paper suggests that Global North actors have a clear responsibility to challenge these prevailing global power structures by holding their governments to account for past and present harms inflicted across the Global South. In this, their role is relatively clear. Less obvious is the extent to which they should continue to engage in redistributing resources back to the Global South through aid or advocacy support, or whether this work should more rightly be led by those in the Global South who both face the reality of global injustice and are on the forefront of resistance and alternatives.

This discussion paper is primarily aimed at civil society organisations in the international development sector that benefit from 'Global North power and privilege', a term explored further in section 2.¹ It is hoped that the paper will be relevant to many – from those working in international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to those in women's rights organisations. The challenges discussed are especially pertinent for those seeking to play a role in global feminist movements, given current critiques by Southern feminists of how Global North-based organisations try to dominate these movements without acknowledging power dynamics or the priorities and analysis coming from different parts of the world.

This discussion paper makes no claims to definitive answers or originality. Instead, it offers questions and challenges to provoke critical reflection, debate and action. In the words of [Audre Lorde](#):

There are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us... There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves – along with the renewed courage to try them out.

¹ Throughout this paper, the term 'organisation' refers to civil society organisations.



1.1 What is the problem?

Over recent years, many international development organisations with their primary centres of power in the Global North have claimed to transition their work from a ‘charity’ to ‘justice’ framing, and some even say they have begun the process of ‘decolonising’ their work. Nonetheless, many of their practices still perpetuate unequal and harmful power dynamics that obstruct efforts for achieving transformative change.

While the structures of Global North-based organisations are neither monolithic nor static, broad trends can be observed and the reflections throughout this paper will resonate with most. A dramatic increase in the size and reach of these organisations over the last decades has taken place within the context of what is sometimes termed the ‘aid industrial complex’. This has been accompanied by an increasing corporatisation of Northern organisations – mainly INGOs – complete with financial targets and key performance indicators. Driven by their own growth imperatives, such organisations often reproduce neo-colonial relations, while ultimately siphoning off substantial funds that should be returned to the Global South. Meanwhile, that their access to these resources arises from global inequities and extraction of wealth from the Global South, or that they have a duty to return these resources, is seldom acknowledged.

Below are some of the ways that Global North organisations sustain neo-colonial relationships with organisations and actors from the Global South:

The continued replication of charity and ‘white saviour’ approaches:


- A ‘victim-centred’ approach and narrative still exists, especially as part of fundraising efforts. For example, the recent ‘We the Helpers’ campaign presented Global North responders as altruistic and capable, while framing Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) in ‘distant locations’ as helpless, and invisibilising the work of local organisations.
- Southern organisations are often positioned as lacking capacity, which is used as an excuse to justify Northern organisations occupying facilitation roles and thereby reinforcing unequal power relations.
- Northern organisations are understood to hold a comparative advantage in technical expertise, big-picture thinking on policy and access to key information and decision-makers, with Southern organisations providing the ‘case studies’.

The problematisation of the Global South:

- The Global South is often understood and treated as a monolith.
- There is a continued focus on the Global South as the site where change is needed, rather than the Global North and the international economic structures that were built by former colonisers and continue to operate for the primary benefit of the Global North.

Global North imperatives still define agendas:

- Northern organisations are not transparent about what drives them to do their work and set agendas based on their own national contexts – such as their government agendas or what will appeal to public fundraising and campaigning



efforts. Southern organisations are then ‘consulted’ within these pre-fixed parameters despite being integral to defining Northern actors’ expertise and capacity.

- Northern donors concentrate on funding the latest fashionable priority, then move on wholesale to the next issue once that trend has passed.
- Southern organisations are used in fundraising bids that mostly benefit Northern organisations, which receive the lion’s share of funds from such consortiums.
- The long-term systemic struggles of Southern groups and communities are reduced to project deliverables and log frames – focused only on short-term solutions and impacts – with timescales and demands determined by Northern project cycles rather than Southern realities.
- Transformative ideas are co-opted, depoliticised and reduced to palatable, technical approaches such as the conflation of decolonisation with localisation.

As a result, many Global South-based organisations and actors are understandably critical of the role that Northern organisations continue to play, and the space and resources they take up in sustaining their own international development sector.

1.2 Our positionality as the Gender and Development Network

This discussion paper is authored by an organisation located in the Global North that benefits from the legacies of colonialism through, but not limited to, its geographic location, its proximity and access to global centres of political and economic power, and its institutional whiteness. The Gender and Development Network (GADN) was set up to promote gender equality and women’s rights globally and, as a network of United Kingdom (UK)-based organisations that includes many INGOs, we work to support and challenge our members in their policy and practice. Given our location in London, UK – a site of massive global wealth accumulation and the seat of the British Empire – we recognise that it is incumbent on us to hold our government accountable for its past and present actions, with a particular focus on challenging exploitative international economic systems as well as promoting feminist and decolonial alternatives.

In writing this discussion paper, we at GADN recognise that we have a dual role: we are a Northern organisation contributing our own observations and experiences, but we also seek to collate and share others’ views about the potential role of Global North organisations in combatting global injustices. We are aware that in choosing what to include, we bring in our own biases and positionality, including along lines of location, race, age, gender, class and connections to diaspora communities.

1.3 Our approach to developing this discussion paper

This discussion paper is based on a survey of relevant work by others, the many rich conversations the authors have been party to over the years, and a series of interviews conducted in 2022 with advocates and activists from around the world who are quoted throughout the paper and listed in full in the acknowledgements on page 2. The



publications we have consulted, as well as further resources shared with us by interviewees and peer reviewers, have been collated in appendix 2, and the complete methodology for this discussion paper can be found in appendix 1. Throughout the paper, there are sub-sections entitled, 'Dilemmas and suggestions', which contain difficult issues that have arisen and possible ways forward, in the hope that these will provoke thought and action.

1.4 What this discussion paper will cover

As a background to the discussion, section 2 begins with a description of the power contexts that shape the international development sector, and that are central to understanding the role of Northern organisations in combatting global injustices. Then, in section 3, the paper considers *why* such organisations have a duty to combat global injustices, exploring the concepts of responsibility and solidarity. Section 4 brings together a wide range of observations as to *how* the working relationship should be transformed – starting with self-reflection, to interrogation of what being 'Southern-led' really means, to practical suggestions for ways of working together in the context of current power dynamics. These discussions then allow reflection in section 5 as to *what* the role of Northern actors should look like, and the fundamental changes that are required to get there, followed by concluding observations and questions for discussion in the final section.

2. Setting the scene - power contexts

An interrogation of the role of Northern organisations needs to start from an understanding of some of the power dynamics that frame the context in which we work. These concepts are complex and have been interrogated and contested for decades; this paper does not seek to detail these debates comprehensively but rather signpost readers to their importance. The section concludes by considering the value of 'Global North' and 'Global South' as categories.

2.1 Power contexts shape our reality

Broadly, the power relations that constitute the international development sector can be described – to quote Black feminist writer [bell hooks](#) – as “imperialist, capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy”. These dominant and interlocking systems of oppression have created, and continue to maintain, our global socioeconomic and political realities. They will frame and constrain any actions we try to take, and they must be part of understanding the power of the Global North in international development.

2.1.1 European colonialism

For over 400 years, a small number of Western European countries have dictated our understanding of the world through the core premise of colonialism – that is, the violent



territorial dispossession and exploitation of non-European people, their resources and their land, in the pursuit of wealth, power and prosperity for Europeans. While the overt shackles of colonisation might have now largely disappeared, international relations still overwhelmingly favour the former colonial powers both formally and informally.² These dynamics are also readily apparent in the international development sector.

2.1.2 A colonial international financial system

The international development sector operates within unequal global economic and political systems, directly shaped by colonialism to benefit colonisers at the expense of countries in the Global South. The term neo-colonialism has been used to describe the deliberate biases that are built into international financial institutions (IFIs), including the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization. The United States of America (USA), as the world's largest superpower, plays an outsized role in maintaining this imbalance within the global financial system. The UK also has a major role in the global debt system, dating back to colonialism, with international debts often still governed by English law, while transnational corporations (TNCs) are also rooted in colonialism and enjoy benefits and protections afforded by current international financial, rules despite evidence of poor practice and exploitation.

The legal, political and social movements calling for reparations around the globe have sought repair for the harm, loss and damage caused by both current and centuries-worth of European colonialism and enslavement. Reparations range from psychological, cultural and environmental repairs to financial compensation from former colonisers. Foreign aid might be seen as one such transfer of resources, but its monetary value is a small fraction of what is owed to countries in the Global South after 400 years of exploitation. Furthermore, the continued harm perpetrated – through unequal tax, trade and investment rules and illicit financial flows – outweighs any apparent financial benefits of foreign aid. Crucially, with its roots in the concept of charity rather than justice and atonement, foreign aid also cannot be seen as a replacement for reparations.

2.1.3 White supremacy

A pervasive system of racial hierarchies was created and enforced by Western Europeans to justify their colonial atrocities against non-European people – and was the foundation for what is now commonly termed 'white supremacy'. This often-unspoken framework positions white people as superior to non-white people, compounding over the centuries to confer unearned benefits and structural power to white people on the basis of skin colour. White supremacy is central to power dynamics and differential perceptions of capacity between Global South and Global North organisations and actors.

² Formal colonies also continue to exist including Guam, the Virgin Islands, the Chagos Islands and Puerto Rico, among others.

2.1.4 Patriarchy

Also central to our understanding of the power contexts that shape our world is patriarchy, a system of power that privileges men while subordinating women and gender-expansive people in both public and private life. Within the household, women shoulder the burden of unpaid care responsibilities that are vital for sustaining the economy. Beyond the household, women fill the gaps left in communities through repeated cycles of austerity and state failure to provide functioning social services. They are also overrepresented in jobs in care industries, which tend to be underpaid, informal and widely undervalued.

2.1.5 Feminist analysis of power frameworks

To understand these power contexts and how to shift them, it is necessary to look beyond the traditional, oppressive power – power *over* – that is derived from formal concepts of authority and the control of resources. [Feminist analysis](#) looks at other forms of power, including power *to* and power *within*, which speak to the individual powers we each have to imagine and shape our world. Transformative power, or power *with*, seeks to build collective strength by identifying common ground through cooperation and collaboration. This form of power could provide a constructive way forward for those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ seeking to work better with organisations and actors in the Global South.

2.2 What is the Global South and what is the Global North?

There is no universally agreed definition for the geopolitical terms ‘Global South’ and ‘Global North’, although they have often been used as shorthand to describe the different sites of struggle and domination outlined in section 2.1. Both concepts are problematic in their oversimplification and creation of a false binary, but they can still be useful for broadly identifying who benefits from global economic and political systems and therefore holds responsibility for challenging this injustice. Broadly speaking, the Global North is used to describe countries that are relatively powerful, financially rich and majority white; many were formerly the centres of colonial empires, but all tend to benefit from the global capitalist systems built on those colonial legacies. On the other hand, the Global South – also sometimes described as the Global Majority – describes countries and peoples that have been and continue to be exploited by colonisation and neo-capitalist global systems, and which are therefore relatively financially poor.

These terms should not obscure the gross inequalities of wealth and influence within these geopolitical regions, determined in part by class and caste structures as well as by patriarchy, white supremacy and other forms of marginalisation. Within countries that were colonised, certain privileged groups stood to benefit from exploitation and continue to enjoy disproportionate influence and wealth across generations. Meanwhile, socio-politically excluded and impoverished classes also exist in the Global North.

While there is no clear dichotomy between the Global South and Global North, there is even less clarity over what would count as a ‘Global North organisation’, particularly in



light of the models and types of international development organisations that have appeared in recent years. Many such organisations brand themselves global or international, and distinctions have been further muddled by decentralisation, which has led some INGOs to move their primary offices to the Global South, where their critical staff base, including their strategic decision-making and leadership, are located.


2.2.1 Defining ‘Global North power and privilege’

One way to approach this question is to consider what benefits an organisation, or individual derives by its affiliation with the Global North – for the purposes of this paper, what we are calling ‘Global North power and privilege’. At the risk of perpetuating a false dichotomy between Global South and Global North, it is important to have a term that highlights the responsibility that those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ hold. This might include matters such as where an organisation is legally registered, where both visible and invisible power resides within its decision-making structures, where its funding comes from and its impact on public communications and campaigns, salary structures, and the organisation’s own history, values and worldview. Our suggestion is that rather than trying to define whether an organisation is from the Global North, organisations should instead consider how they benefit from ‘Global North power and privilege’, including benefits derived from the legacies of colonialism. The Global North or Northern organisations and actors referred to throughout this paper, are those that benefit from ‘Global North power and privilege’.

Some of the Southern feminists interviewed for this paper also stressed that organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’ vary greatly in the degree of privilege that they have, and the way that they use it. They distinguished between INGOs, who are sometimes part of the problem, and more progressive feminist organisations. Distinctions were similarly made among organisations based in the Global South. Southern organisations are not – just by sheer virtue of their location – automatically progressive in their outlook or practices, nor are they necessarily committed to dismantling structural oppressions. Being ‘Southern-led’ (as discussed in section 4.2) therefore requires political choices by all actors around collaboration, interrogating for example the organisation’s principles, constituencies, power analysis and understanding colonial legacies.

Organisations are also made up of individuals, and this too blurs the distinction between Global South and Global North. These individuals are also a complex mix of ethnicities, place of birth, education, current location, immigration status and racial identities, amongst other markers. These complex and multifaceted identities, especially in our capacity as employees, further adds nuance to what might constitute a Global North or Global South organisation.

For those that benefit from the kind of ‘Global North power and privilege’ outlined above – both as organisations and individuals – there is a responsibility to constantly reflect on positionality, and to examine its impact on our work combatting global injustices. While



it might not be easy, those of us working in organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’ have a responsibility to acknowledge the benefits we derive and challenge their problematic practices. Delving deeper into how we see these dynamics at work, the next section explores the different motivations of these Northern organisations, as the first step of reflection and challenge.

Northern organisations must not just abdicate their roles, as they have been beneficiaries of these unequal systems. And we should not expect the Global South to just step up and fix global messes. The Global North has a responsibility to do its part in fixing the messes they have made. (Theo Sowa)

3. Why should those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ work towards combatting global injustices?


Debates amongst Northern organisations on their role in combatting global injustices have tended to centre on how to improve the ways that they work, within existing organisational remits. Much less time is spent considering *why* they are involved at all and what role they should therefore perform. Our suggestion is first to interrogate the *why*, which can then lead us to reflect more meaningfully on *how* to be good allies and *what* the role of Northern organisations should be.

Our consideration of the *why* starts from an assumption, reinforced by the consultations we conducted for this discussion paper, that notions of charity and ‘giving back’ are steeped in colonial history, particularly when combined with ‘white saviour’ approaches to communications and fundraising. We therefore do not explore the charity paradigm further and instead focus on two other imperatives to act. The first of these is the responsibility of organisations and citizens of the Global North to hold our governments to account. The second strand centres on solidarity, acknowledging common struggles against capitalism, patriarchy and neo-colonialism, even if they are experienced differentially.

3.1 Responsibility and atonement

Widely highlighted by our interviewees is the need for organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’ to recognise and atone for the benefits they have derived from past and present abuses of power by their governments, whether in relation to colonialism, climate change or global economic inequalities:

We need Northern organisations, white social justice donors, leaders – all of them. We need them to not wince and shy away from the conversation about



colonialism and violence and historical responsibility. If you're going to be hurt and sensitive, then the cause is lost.” (Sanam Amin)

There's not only a role [to be played] – it's an imperative. All of the damage that's been caused lately in both the economic and environmental arenas that are structural roots to the social inequalities, are the responsibility of Northern actors. (Emilia Reyes)

There should be more influence in your own countries with your own public and electorate, as well as your own governments. And that would be really helpful if you manage to show, for example, that it's your consumption that is driving climate change, not us, and you need to reduce it. Or that you are being protected by vaccines and we are not. (Priyanthi Fernando)

The challenges laid down to Northern organisations are also further determined by context:

In settler colonies such as Canada, the United States, Australia, there is a clear demand to give land back to First Nations custodians, for instance. What are Northern actors domiciled in these countries doing to support that? In the context of the UK, which has rapidly become a tax haven, what are UK-based organisations doing to demand progressive taxation, decarbonisation and demilitarisation? (Sanam Amin)

For some in the Global North, recognition of this responsibility is already a primary motivation for their work on global justice, calling on their governments for atonement and reparations in acknowledgement of past and present harm:


As advocates in Northern organisations, we need to first of all, advocate with our own governments in the Global North because these are the main perpetrators of the structural and systematic challenges the world is facing today, ranging from climate change, tax abuse, illicit financial flows and debt crisis etc, all of which continue to deepen inequalities. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

3.2 Solidarity

The concept of solidarity is often used to break away from framings of charity and paternalism. We asked interviewees to define what solidarity meant to them and, while answers differed, some commonalities emerged – notably, the idea of identifying common cause and using the power we each have.

3.2.1 Common cause

The notion of ‘common cause’ – where everyone shares a stake in the outcome of a struggle and stands alongside those most affected, even if their experiences are different – is core to collective action. It reflects a long-held approach of workers’ movements and



transcends notions of Global South and North. Interviewees based in the Global South referred to:

Identifying something that we know affects us universally and coming together, giving a voice to it and pushing to be heard as a collective while putting aside some of the differences that we might have. (Memory Kachambwa)

Understanding the communality of manifestations of the issues we are fighting globally, i.e., that the problems we are facing [in the] North and South are connected. (Pontso Mafethe)

The notion of common cause also surfaces in the language used by individuals, organisations and movements:

In the trade union movement, we say in Spanish compañeros, compañeras, that is partners. In the trade union movement...you say comrade. (Verónica Montúfar)

Reflections from interviewees in the Global North also recognised common cause, while acknowledging their own positionality:


The crises that we're living under, even though they may manifest differently in different contexts, and maybe have worse impacts, especially in the South...the systems, and the root causes of these crises, are all interconnected, and we do, ultimately, all experience them, albeit to very different degrees...[we need] a reflective and reflexive solidarity, which recognises the role of the countries that we live in and work in, [where] these problems [are] produced. (Kate Donald)

Our struggles are interconnected, and...they're part of a global system of oppression that takes many forms and has many roots, like neoliberal capitalism, white supremacist patriarchy, like extraction in general. These...are manifested in different ways all over the world, and we have to address them together. (Katie Tobin)

It's not about "friendshipness". Obviously, through movements there's trust, there's co-creation, there's joint activity and action as an expression of solidarity, but I think at the heart, it really is just being part of a common struggle for a justice cause...so leveraging the power that we have as the Global North. (Joanna Pradela)

3.2.2 Using the power we each have

Equally important to the concept of solidarity is each of us using the power we have, where it is most effective, in support of one another. Solidarity should not be seen only in the context of Global North and Global South, but across all continents and struggles, whether with feminist, Indigenous peoples' or workers' movements:



Solidarity is the most unselfish form of love. You're standing up for people who cannot, for a cause that you might never see the realization of... Solidarity means love and sort of an intergenerational love and a broad global love across time and space. (Sanam Amin)

We have a responsibility to work together with people who are most affected by the problems that we all face. (Kate Donald)

Though it might not be a personal experience, if it's an experience of women in other parts of the world, then drawing on the power that we do have as a Global North organisation to try and bring justice to those issues is an important contribution that we can make. (Joanna Pradela)

Solidarity that is free of paternalism requires more equal relationships recognising the hidden power of others:

Solidarity is a bilateral way of seeing relationships that could be individual, collective, institutional, organisational relationships. (Verónica Montúfar)

My definition of feminism draws from [Audre Lorde](#), who said, "I am not free while any person is unfree, even when their shackles are very different from my own." (Katie Tobin)³


Solidarity can be theoretical and esoteric, so tangible indicators are helpful. These might relate to when and how we each show up, what we understand the problems to be, what we are trying to achieve and how our respective objectives are shaped by the power dynamics between us:

We define solidarity action in two distinct groups, one being 'accomplices', which are the ones...who walk through the fire with us... But for us, it's also about timing. So, for us, solidarity is about when people are with you when you need them to be. It's a bit hollow when the offer comes later. (Noelene Nabulivou)

It's not a theoretical solidarity. It's not an abstract solidarity. It's active solidarity. So being able to advocate for movements, to provide spaces for movements, and directly support movements. (Marta Musić)

Our organisation has made the political decisions to focus and reinforce power of our unions in the South. (Verónica Montúfar)

³ The original quotation from Audre Lorde reads, "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own." She goes on to argue, "And I am not free as long as one person of color remains chained. Nor is anyone of you."



Thus, among our interviewees there was relatively strong consensus on the imperative for those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ to accept responsibility for challenging their government. Solidarity was also identified as a driving force for action, although with less agreement on the extent to which there exists a global common cause. In the next section, we explore how those with this ‘Global North power and privilege’ can act on these imperatives, while recognising and addressing their power in relationships.

4. How can organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’ improve the way they work?

This next section brings together dilemmas and suggestions relating to *how* actors and organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’ can best work with Global South actors. The ideas outlined below range from the eminently doable to the challengingly disruptive. Some work within current frameworks, while others pose more fundamental questions. Many of these ideas are not new and reflect existing feminist principles such as the [Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists](#) or proposals that challenge [white supremacy culture](#).


Starting with the need for honesty, particularly about positionality and self-interest, this section then explores challenges for those Northern organisations that are attempting to be ‘Southern-led’ in their advocacy. The section finishes by looking at some concrete ways for Northern organisations to improve their ways of working.

The term ‘Southern-led’ is deliberately used here to highlight decades of imbalance, where the Global North has dominated. However, some of our interviewees expressed concern that the use of this term should not obscure the need for approaches that are cooperatively-led and grounded in building *power with* rather than *power over*. Nor should ‘Southern-led’ be used as an excuse by those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ to duck their responsibilities:

The issue isn’t about being Northern-led or Southern-led but actually having respectful joint partnerships and leadership...ultimately, we are talking about global movements that are cooperatively, collectively led, where different actors take different types of leads in different situations to really change the current perception that everything happens from the top – whether that top is being led by the South or the top is being led by the North. (Theo Sowa)

4.1 From self-reflection to change

A willingness to reflect honestly and openly, emerged repeatedly as central to the work that needs to be done. Organisations and actors that benefit from ‘Global North power



and privilege' need to take stock of *why* we are really working with organisations in the Global South, before re-examining our own role in light of those reflections. Critically, that process of reflection must then lead to action. Some key areas for reflection include organisations' own positionality and self-interest, their internal agendas and limitations, and the quality of the relationships built with other actors in the sector and around the world.

4.1.1 Power, positionality and self-interest

A precursor for appropriate action is acknowledgement and understanding of the particular power and privileges that Northern actors hold – individually, organisationally, or together. This is especially important for those organisations that are engaged in decentralising or internationalising their structures or ways of working:

...with an open mind and questioning, questioning their role, questioning the base of how we work together, making sure that everything was done really in solidarity and because it's more than rhetoric. (Theo Sowa)

Trying to figure out that balance of space to have honest conversation, and then to be flexible seems to be the things that have helped so far. (Katie Tobin)


Realism about how challenging change can be is also necessary, as recognition of one's own power and its effects can be painful and accompanied by a sense of fragility:

Being honest and critical often causes pain – even if it's a necessary part of the process and we need to manage this and be honest about it with healthy conflict-transformation skills. (Noelene Nabulivou)

Everyone in our sector has a feeling that they want to be making the world a better place in one way or the other and likes to think of themselves in this positive light. It's hard for people to be told that what they're doing has harmed people, is harming people, is taking money away, that they're part of the problem on a personal level. That's hard for people to really internalize, and deal with and process, then put into some change in behaviour. Creating space for that internally, where you can be open-minded enough to take that in, to listen, to change your ways, to not assume you have all the answers, and that it's okay to make mistakes, and things like that. You might get attacked on things, but that's part of being in this space. Honestly, you have to be okay with it, because we [Global North organisations] represent a lot of horrible things to a lot of people. (Emma Burgisser)

4.1.2 Organisational agendas and limitations

A recurrent theme is that those of us working for organisations with 'Global North power and privilege' must strive to be honest about the limitations within which our organisations operate, while all the time challenging them. The demands of donors,



national governments' legal and financial requirements, and organisations' own supporter bases, are all situated within the frameworks of colonial legacies, white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism, shaping and constraining an organisation's ways of working:

Borne out of lived experience and grounded everyday realities, women – and particularly women of the Global South – have a concrete and fuller view of the world of oppression and injustice. And this is reflected in their strategic, even radical calls and demands. But North-based organisations are limited or constrained for various reasons in embracing these. These include their own organisational mandates and contexts in their own countries, even the way they have constructed themselves as feminists. (Mae Buenaventura)

The pressure of donors asking...organisations to show that they are winning anything versus longer-term or more systemic policy struggles and policy battles...has tended to take precedence over what really needs to be done, and that may involve a more systemic, and more collective, and...longer-term approach. This has led to all the politics of reports and their logos and [organisational] loan shares...and has also tended to focus attention much more on audience-based landing pads rather than places where policy is actually shaped. (Stefano Prato)

But challenging these constraints is possible:


We want to portray women as the powerful actors that they are in coming up with the solutions that are impacting them and their communities and societies at large, and it is our duty to find ways of telling that story to our donors without weakening it. Because oftentimes, they don't want to hear that story of power. They are conditioned to hear and value the story of victimhood because of the white saviourism approach they are more familiar with in international development aid. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

Dilemmas and suggestions

Fundamentally, there is a danger that Northern organisations will claim to aspire to be 'Southern-led' – further examined in section 4.2 – when, in fact, they know that this cannot currently happen because of organisational ambitions, structures and imperatives. This then has the potential to deepen an unrealistic and dishonest relationship whereas acknowledging the realpolitik constraints has a greater potential to create an honest relationship.

4.1.3 Extractive relationships

Northern organisations also derive self-serving benefits from their relationships with Southern actors, from increased funding opportunities to enhanced legitimacy,



recognition and greater access to decision-makers. Such real and potential benefits can incentivise working relationships that are extractive:

The fact that we do have access to and amplify the voices and bring narratives and priorities of the Global South into our sphere of power, that definitely is an entry point for us to have something to say. So, I think we've got a huge amount of legitimacy from that, and so we have to be really cognisant of how we are trading on that legitimacy and ensuring we aren't trading on it in a way that crowds out the voices of the very people who are giving us that legitimacy. (Joanna Pradela)

Relationships with Southern organisations are also a conduit to increased funding opportunities, bolstering perceived expertise. This ranges from institutional and philanthropic donors to individual giving via dedicated supporter bases:

Even the funding we get from individuals, mainly it's because of the work we do with Southern-based organisations... Our ability to fundraise is made possible by the work we do with Southern-based organisational partners. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

Some Northern organisations are also highly extractive in their use of images in public messaging and campaigns work. Such images dehumanise people from the Global South as they incite pity to raise funds from white people in the Global North:


Expecting us to just dangle at a whim, because you need to show a Black face or an African face, or, you know, to tick your diversity card... The number of organisations who have had these images of poverty porn. And then, if you look at who their photographers are, it's all white men. And so that's how they see the world and that's how they see us. But that's what they know will have people jerking tears and spending money on their individual giving. (Crystal Simeoni)

Even Northern organisations that profile Southern campaigns and campaigners in respectful ways can still use this to fundraise for their own organisations rather than the Southern movements. (Tim Jones)

Dilemmas and suggestions

Those of us working in the Global North need to acknowledge personal self-interest and how we benefit as individuals, whether in terms of learning, friendships, travel or a sense of self-worth, from collaborating with Global South actors:

For our organisations and our advocacy work, I think we get much more than we offer. We get content, we get a kind of moral satisfaction of being in line with the demands and the priorities of those on the frontlines. And then as individuals, we get knowledge in a way that's much more useful, at least for me, than knowledge



that I got at university, or at least it makes it more real. We get to travel; we get to go to interesting places. These are also elements of the huge privilege we live out through this work. (Katie Tobin)

All too often, as Northern organisations, we may pride ourselves in taking a ‘partnership approach’ to how we work with Southern organisations – based on principles of equality and solidarity – while failing to acknowledge the benefits we derive from working with Southern ‘partners’, a term that frequently obscures deeply embedded power relations.

4.2 ‘Southern-led’ advocacy

Ultimately, given the contexts of power in which we all live and operate, there is emerging consensus that the advocacy of organisations located in the Global North should be ‘Southern-led’ or ‘Southern-anchored’. Those who face the worst impacts of oppressive global systems should shape strategies for dismantling them:

The strategic vision needs to stem from the South because that's where the structural analysis and the structural solutions are coming from. (Emilia Reyes)

There is recognition that this may not always be easy, but underlying commitment to be led by the experiences, analyses and strategies of those from the South is much needed:


The commitment to the principle of guidance and leadership by Southern groups should be a good north star, but the other piece of feminist organising that is hard is that we are expected to get everything right on the first go. There also needs to be some understanding that there will be mistakes and learning along the way, on all levels. (Sanam Amin)

‘Southern-led’ advocacy that aims to transform global power structures must also include as an objective the deliberate redistribution of power and resources back to organisations and movements in the Global South. Southern actors have suggested that those of us in the Global North need to be transparent and deliberate in our actions, beyond the written commitments couched in our strategy documents.

4.2.1 The challenges of being ‘Southern-led’

Too often, as Northern organisations, we constrain ourselves to respond to our governments’ priorities rather than engaging in the long-term work of changing their agendas. To be ‘Southern-led’, however, requires transformative advocacy with a clear justice orientation:

[Northern organisations] have got to be working out what their positions are on foreign policy...be willing to speak about foreign policy, because a lot of them don't speak from a gender and development paradigm, they don't speak from a justice paradigm or from a decolonisation platform, or from anti-debt or from all of these mal-development frames. (Noelene Nabulivou)



There is also a clear challenge from Southern advocates for those in the Global North to adopt more radical policy positions, reflecting the transformative change that is vitally needed:

[Northern organisations] are not responding [to] the level of urgency and radicalism that we expect them to at this historical key juncture in which the planet is being destroyed. And we have seen that when we are collectively discussing solutions, those in the Global North are slowing us down. They are toning down the message. They're slowing us down in the type of demands... (Emilia Reyes)

In the past – like, in the 1990s – Global North organisations might call for cancellation of a debt out of charity, and the Global South campaigners reacted against that, saying, “No, we don't owe this debt, we shouldn't pay this debt.” And this is a big difference in narratives. (Tim Jones)

Moreover, the skills of those in the Global North must lie not just in knowing what government agendas are but knowing how to use and change them. Northern actors need to be willing to push these boundaries, and at times risk the close relationships and access we may have built up. After all, what is the value of building this relationship if it is not to be used for transformative change?

Not everything can be devoted towards keeping a good working relationship. Global South movements need to see more Global North groups burn some bridges. (Sanam Amin)

Unless you are able to do the work that shifts hearts and minds, the policy wins are precarious. And they don't mean anything. (Shereen Essof)


Dilemmas and suggestions

In attempting to become more 'Southern-led', the issue of *who* we as Northern actors choose to work with in the Global South then becomes all the more important. There are vast differences within and between countries and regions, not least in relation to their experiences of colonisation, and this has produced very different analyses, priorities and approaches:

The diversity in the [African] continent can never be homogenised. (Memory Kachambwa)

Within countries, intersecting identities such as class and caste shape realities, priorities and proposed solutions. In seeking to become 'Southern-led', there is therefore a danger of prioritising the voices of middle-class women in the Global South:

...one of my major problems right now within movement work is actually more about elite within the economic South. (Noelene Nabulivou)



It is also important for Northern organisations to educate themselves about power inequalities in the Global South. Even if they redistribute resources to Global South organisations, they could be reinforcing marginalisations within those countries. The most well-known organisations may be led by (and benefit) the most privileged. (Gopika Bashi)

Working with constituency-based organisations who, in turn, work with marginalised populations – especially those women and gender-expansive people furthest from power – could help address this point. In reality, for all of us wherever we are situated, our political choices will be inherent in the choice of who to work with, raising the question of how to be more transparent and intentional in that decision-making.

4.2.2 Being anti-racist and decolonial


In the joint pursuit of global justice, organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’ need to be anti-racist and decolonial in their approaches – but what does this mean in reality? Beyond just words, a decolonial approach seeks to recognise, make visible and address the ongoing legacies of colonialism across all facets of an organisation’s work. Anti-racism strives to transform the conditions that enable racism in all its forms. Such approaches must be at the core of any Northern organisation or actor that seeks to work with Southern groups. Showing up, without taking over, is key. Some of the practices that our interviewees found most helpful were for Global North organisations to proactively undertake their own learning without depending on Southern actors to guide them:

The most useful thing is when Northern organisations and their leadership have done that homework, have come with that humility, have done their best to live that conscientiousness of centring BIPOC and communities from the Global South. And then we don’t have to think of all of the things to ask for because we also don’t even think of asking it because we’re so used to the way the world is. (Sanam Amin)

[Northern organisations] have got to do a lot more work on anti-racism, anti-imperialism. You know, there’s a lot of them who, for instance, won’t even do any work on Indigenous relationships within their own country. So, it’s very hard for someone like me who works strongly on Indigenous rights to be working with a Northern organisation that refuses to look at their own racism. (Noelene Nabulivou)

Interviewees also valued Northern actors who were prepared to speak up, without necessarily waiting for or relying on Global South actors to point out the right time for issues to be raised:

Because we also need our white, cis, male, Northern...any combination of those...allies to speak up and cannot always fall back on us to say everything



and answer everything. Because it is very tiring, and it is a lot of work. (Sanam Amin)

4.2.3 Common values and shared agendas

Trust built on common values is arguably the bedrock for any global advocacy that is ‘Southern-led’. Some of the best, most trusting working relationships have developed over a long period of time, where shared political analysis and agendas have been built on mutual understanding removing the need for constant consultation that adds to time and resource burdens. Exploring shared values is an essential step in good allyship, requiring Northern organisations to identify our own principles and political understandings of injustice – and then be transparent about them in places like our websites. This makes it much easier for Southern organisations to make clear decisions as to who they will and will not work with. Conversely, rushing to build any kind of common platform, coalition or joint action can lead to division and misunderstandings:

There's a shorthand set of actions that are possible because if we go into anything together, we already know that we've done our kind of feminist thinking and principle-making together. And that's also then allowed us to grow movements together because it means that we are very clear on what we mean by certain sets of actions. (Noelene Nabulivou)


Create space for Southern-based partners to be in one room and discuss issues that are emerging from different countries but also start to draw out the common issues that are affecting all of them and work with them to build an advocacy agenda around those [issues]. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

I think that first and foremost is to really share a collective analysis of the problem. That is where it's easier, because it's always easier to agree and coalesce around the analysis of the problem than the definition of the solutions. (Stefano Prato)

Based on the identification of common values and goals, building an agenda together can also be an important part of developing relationships. This requires meaningful consultation and holistic partnerships:

Truly joint partnership is where we mutually identify what it is that we want to work on, the change that we want to see [and] how we're going to work on those issues together. (Theo Sowa)

Opportunities for real, proper old-school solidarity, and the kind of multi-actor movements that include organisations, entities, collectives in the Global North, with partners in communities in the Global South, [based on] that commonality of...the manifestations, whether it's poverty, whether it's growing inequality, those things are increasingly universal. (Pontso Mafethe)



Also important is the need for equal respect and recognising what everyone brings to the table:

I think that the most important thing of this relationship is this equal contribution and this equal sharing, and this equal respect. (Verónica Montúfar)

Dilemmas and suggestions

Building common agendas within existing power structures is not easy, risking perpetuating neo-colonial relationships and making assumptions about shared issues – even those that might be driven by opposition to those same systems of oppression. In research for this paper there emerged a tension between suggestions that shared values and analysis could be identified collectively, and proposals that all agendas should come from and be driven from the Global South, respecting the specificities and histories of particular regions, countries and contexts. There are very different histories of political thought and change derived from different struggles across the Global South, shaped by centuries of incarceration and violent resistance from the state that challenge the notion of a common agenda. Such fundamental differences in perspectives cannot easily be resolved through consultation.


Nor can the realities of funding relationships be discounted, with many Northern organisations still providing grants to Southern organisations. Inevitably, this creates huge power imbalances when attempting to build joint agendas. Working collectively, all actors will bring different types of value – and, in turn, power – to the table. However, the disproportionate power that money brings cannot be ignored in such relationships, nor can its ability to limit honesty and critique if there is a perception that the funding could be withdrawn.

4.2.4 Building trust person-to-person

For some, building trust starts on a person-to-person level, which can be the foundation for developing trust between organisations. Our findings stress the importance of face-to-face contact and personal relationships for solidarity and navigating complex conversations. Understanding each other as people is key, alongside making space within and outside formal work environments to develop these relationships – ideally located within the Global South:

Meetings are very important for us to connect, for us to converse, for us to understand each other's realities and hear each other, and build relationships and trust. (Sanam Amin)

I think it begins with relationship-building and trust-building, and this mostly happens as we break bread together. Once that sisterhood and that trust happen, then you can work out how to work together... Spend time with people, have conversations, base relationships on sisterhood – that needs to come before you take out the work plans. Some of the best work, and the best collective work that



I've done, is with people who I have relationships with, and we have a sense of vulnerability and safety that means there is space to speak truth to each other, holding ourselves to account, pushing each other a little bit further than we're comfortable with. Recognising where discomfort lies and how we can navigate it.
(Crystal Simeoni)

Dilemmas and suggestions

Despite the value of in-person interactions, in practical terms, this cannot always be accommodated due to the cost and environmental impact of international travel, regressive visa regimes and public health considerations, amongst other factors. As individuals, we may also need to recognise the enormous personal benefit we get from costly travel, which may skew our decisions as to whether such trips can be justified. Relationships built on in-person interactions and outside formal work environments also run the risk of concentrating relationships among a very small group working on international processes, at the potential expense of other activists or those whose focus is more national and service-driven.

4.3 Recognising power dynamics in practice


Underscoring many of the concrete proposals and challenges we have collated is the need for organisations and actors with 'Global North power and privilege' to acknowledge this power and understand and challenge the way it shapes working relationships. Here, we examine some of the more practical steps that Northern organisations and actors can consider in order to put these reflections into action.

4.3.1 Taking a step back

Perhaps one of the most fundamental challenges is for Northern organisations to step back from work in the Global South to focus more on the causes that come from the Global North. At the same time, and by doing so, we can make increasing the power and resources of Southern organisations a core objective. An example of how to determine when to take a step back was shared with us in the interviews:

To help us determine where we have a contribution to make by leveraging our locational power in our own right, we use the 3S framework: Step Up, Stand With, Step Back. This helps us to determine what the best role for us is. Sometimes it is to amplify and support the advocacy of others (Stand With); sometimes it is to get out of the way and create space for others (Step Back). But, when we Step Up, we are doing so to use our power to leverage resources and access for women's rights organisations and making our own contribution to feminist movement agendas. (Joanna Pradela)

A recurring observation from our interviews was about how Northern organisations could be more intentional about sharing their access to decision-makers and resources and allowing these relationships to be built independently of their own presence and participation:



So not just opening doors, but really pushing them open and making sure that they stay open. It's not about just bringing in one or two people to sit at a table. It's about breaking that table and finding new ways of forming, which means that voices are given real weight and experiences are given real value. (Theo Sowa)

Another way this can be achieved is for Northern organisations to let go of branding opportunities, instead opting for being invisible in public-facing endeavours:

WEDO is not big on our own branding, and that's one of the things I really like about the organisation and one of the reasons I chose to work here. (Katie Tobin)

Currently, many Northern organisations see their role as doing the so-called global work of bringing together different regions and focusing on international institutions, reinforcing the myth that this work cannot be located in the Global South:

RESURJ came about because we as younger [Global] South feminists wanted to do global advocacy that is locally rooted, but autonomously, without the constraints and silos of coming to global spaces as INGO partners or tokens of representation politics. (Sachini Perera)


Dilemmas and suggestions

Advocating for more and better, unrestricted core funding for Southern organisations, especially women's rights organisations, is a relatively straightforward way to increase resource transfers, much has been written on this topic including from [AWID](#), [Mama Cash](#) and [JASS](#). The practice of sub-granting however remains more contentious, with the potential to perpetuate unequal power dynamics where the resources are controlled by Northern organisations. Some interviewees went further, criticising INGOs for directly competing for funds with Southern women's rights organisations. To address this, Northern organisations could step back, leaving Global South organisations to hold the primary relationship with donors, and sub-granting to Northern organisations if they so choose (explored more in section 5.2.1 on funding):

This is an approach IWDA has been trialling in the last few years. Our partners in the Global South, they're the contract holder, they're the ones visible to the donor, and they're the ones who develop the grant proposal and the programme, administer it and are accountable for it, and then they're simply contracting us for the bits that they want our support in. This is a sort of more transparent way of them telling us what they value in the relationship than us sitting at the top and taking a cut to support with those things. (Joanna Pradela)

4.3.2 Supporting national struggles

While some Global South organisations focus on global issues, others prioritise national policy. Northern organisations risk side-lining these local priorities, funding 'partners' to work on the issues that fit with Northern organisational campaigns – to provide an



evidence base – or pulling activists away from local priorities so that they can be part of global advocacy.

Some of our interviewees reflected on the need to recognise the importance of advocacy work at all levels, not just globally:

Most of the time I find in as much as we do collective action at the global level at the end of the day, most of the actions also have to happen at the national level or at the regional level. (Memory Kachambwa)

At the same time, Northern organisations were concerned not to undermine the agency and sovereignty of Southern governments and national democratic processes:

We don't advocate in other people's context. So, for example, we have partners in Cambodia, let's say, and we would never advocate directly to the Cambodian government ourselves unless our partners asked us to, and we were really clear what power we were bringing to that advocacy and why we were there doing that. (Joanna Pradela)


In the past, proposals for 'positive conditionalities' – that is, offering additional benefits, incentives or funding in exchange for compliance with a set of requirements – attached to lending from IFIs have been particularly problematic. One approach has been to focus Northern advocacy on creating space at international levels for national development strategies – for example, increasing fiscal space for Southern governments through debt cancellation and international tax reform. That said, others point to the value of promoting international standards and agreements as a useful way to support national-level advocacy.

4.3.3 Long-term commitment

The issues on which Northern organisations work are deeply rooted in the experiences and daily realities of many Southern actors for whom this is not simply a job, but is intimately connected to the communities in which they live. International human rights defenders on the frontlines may even be putting their lives at risk in contributing to the struggle.

A major dissonance between organisations located in the Global South and Global North is the way the latter can dip in and out of issues or campaigns, while Southern actors are living the reality. Ultimately, as organisations in the Global North, we must judge our advocacy against whether we have achieved transformative change, not whether we have met our funders' deliverables:

Have you actually thought about what it means when you put out a statement? It's very important that you do the work of following through because these are their lives. And it's not just an annual report at the end of the day. (Sanam Amin)



When you're trying to collaborate with Northern organisations, there's this sense that we have to be realistic, or [that] we can't do everything. "Perfect is the enemy of the good" type of thing. I understand that there are constraints, but there have been scenarios in which that is the default response without any critical reflection, including on how this standpoint replicates existing systems and misses opportunities to put into practice feminist politics and visions in and through our own processes, methodologies and work. (Constanza Pauchulo)

As touched on in section 4.1.2, current funding models, either through institutional donors, philanthropic foundations or individual supporters, have worked to create organisational practices that prioritise quick wins and distil long-term, complex struggles into neat two-year project cycles and campaigns. The work of Northern organisations is to recognise that change is a long-term process and goes well beyond the narrow parameters of our log-frames and workplans, questioning how funding and campaign cycles and deliverables dictate our approaches.

4.3.4 Consultation

Consultation is clearly key to the process of global advocacy becoming 'Southern-led', and there are lessons to be learned on *how* to undertake consultation respectfully. As a starting point, many of our interviewees identified that better consultation requires Northern organisations to listen, and avoid assumptions:

[A] willingness to listen so that you can understand. Not coming with preconceived ideas of what solutions should look like. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

Northern organisations can involve Southern partners in incredibly extractive and time-consuming consultation processes where the parameters have already been set, and where their involvement is little more than tokenistic.

Many Northern organisations have developed where they think, "Oh, we have to consult with the Global South, we have to consult with our partners." And then the number of emails and phone calls and Zoom calls. All of it just taking up time and space, and is not being paid for, as they develop detailed funding proposals which the organisations that they have consulted with have got no access to, in terms of resources. It's incredibly short-sighted, very, very selfish, it happens over and over and over again. And it's an exploitation of the knowledge and the resources of Global South organisations. And I found that deeply, deeply unhelpful. I think consultation is incredibly important, and I don't want people to stop talking to each other... But all these other organisations [need] to think about what they are asking when they do their consultations, what they are asking of their partners? What [are they] asking of people who are in different geographies and in different resource settings? (Theo Sowa)

Dilemmas and suggestions

The question then is how to engage in more meaningful and respectful consultation. Suggestions include recognising the value of people's time and labour and compensating them appropriately; dedicating sufficient time to listen and allow consultations to shape outcomes; including perspectives beyond those that merely reinforce an organisation's existing viewpoints; accommodating multiple languages in consultations; properly attributing people's ideas to them with their consent; and providing feedback on what is done with the information gathered.

Considering at what point in a process to consult is also a dilemma, as early consultation can enable respondents to shape our agendas, but it then becomes important to ensure they see the final result. Such meaningful consultation becomes more possible, and indeed more likely, as part of long-term, trusting relationships with organisations that share political values and goals.

4.3.5 Recognising knowledge, expertise and time

Our interviewees decried a division of labour that sees Northern organisations well remunerated for supplying the strategy and analysis, while Southern organisations provide the case studies and 'lived experience' as illustrations. There is a wealth of knowledge and analysis to be found around the world, which is often ignored or sidelined. Northern organisations even behave as though they are doing favours to Southern organisations by incorporating their evidence, rather than acknowledging the value this brings:


Our work wouldn't be rich if we didn't work with Southern-based organisations. We also draw knowledge, expertise and evidence from the partners we work with, the women's rights organisations. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

As an absolute minimum, there needs to be recognition and respect for the time and expertise involved. Global South actors should be cited and credited for these contributions, given longstanding histories of appropriation of ideas and analysis, and not be re-victimised when asked to partake in global advocacy initiatives:

Attribution to knowledge products from the South [is crucial]. It reproduces politics of conquest and appropriation by the North of the South. (Mae Buenaventura)

Many Northern organisations (I won't mention names) never profile the names of their Southern partners on websites, instead just using pictures and quotes from communities as if the Northern entity has 'boots on the ground'. (Pontso Mafethe)

Using organisational communication channels and access to publicise the work of Southern feminists is one avenue for redressing the balance. Commissioning feminists in the Global South can be another way of debunking the myth that analysis and expertise lie only in the Global North:



It's not about patronising and saying that certain types of knowledge are also valuable. It's actually about being open to different voices and new voices, and thinking about how you make those voices accessible, how you promote those voices, and how you make sure you are not condescending in your attempts to try and be equitable. (Theo Sowa)

This is intimately tied to the concepts of [epistemic violence](#) and [epistemicide](#), which describe the ways that contributions and intellectual labour of certain groups is habitually undervalued, erased and not included in the canon of recognised and respected knowledge. Where such knowledge is included, there is often a failure to cite and credit it – an issue that particularly affects Black, Indigenous, and Women of Colour, especially those who may be less established in their field:


Another thing that comes to mind is knowledge production, and what kind of knowledge gets prioritised and relied upon, and how that impacts how we view or understand the world, or even the questions that we ask, the problems that we see, because that will change what our answers will be or what our strategies will be. (Constanza Pauchulo)

Knowledge imperialism is something that we don't talk about enough. Who's producing what knowledge based on whose histories, contexts and nuances... But the apartheid of knowledge, politics and dynamics there is very, very loud. So who gets to analyse what problems and what informs that analysis? And in turn, what then forms alternatives that are coming out of that or solutions to these problems? What are those based on? And who's doing the actual work, the thinking and who's getting paid for the work and the thinking, that's something that we always must remember. (Crystal Simeoni)

Respect for different forms of expertise, analysis and data is also needed:

They should come as experts of their own issues... They come as advocates, as activists. They come as a collective voice as opposed to like singling out a woman from village X who has gone through sexual violence. Even when she is a survivor of sexual violence, for example, what she brings to the advocacy spaces is much more than that incident that happened to her. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

There are a lot of technical terms, in terms of how things are interpreted, and little consideration of the voices, stories and narratives of lived experiences and qualitative data as forming part of the decisions that will be made because everything is centred around scientific knowledge...But how about human knowledge and indigenous wisdom? (Memory Kachambwa)



In recognising the value of different experiences and knowledge, and the need to share best practices, there is also a need to make room to learn from those facing difficulties and other kinds of struggles with their work:

Sometimes we need to show also losses and how we have fought, and we have gained nothing. Sometimes, these best practices discriminate against those that are struggling but do not have any best practices to show. (Verónica Montúfar)

Countering this traditional division of labour might also involve different roles for Northern organisations. One of the ways our interviewees sought to take on the administrative and financial burdens within joint initiatives in order to free up the time of Southern organisations. However, this too can also cause problems in current power contexts, as we discuss in section 5:


In my work coordinating an initiative across global North and global South groups, I very much see my role as: I will organise all the meetings, try to identify the agenda, hope that people feed into the agenda, but acknowledge that they don't really have time to do so, and then try to facilitate collective decision-making as much as possible in a way that acknowledges differences in capacity and power. That's really hard to do, and takes a long time, but I really think that that should be the contribution of Northern organisations. (Katie Tobin)

4.3.6 Acknowledging past work and political understanding

Failure to value different forms of analysis can also lead Northern organisations to overlook the wealth of understanding from Southern actors that have been active for decades:

Another issue related to knowledge production [is] that many feminists and others in the Global South have been working on these macroeconomic issues for decades. So, to kind of come in as if it's something new or building off of those decades of knowledge, experience, analysis, etc., theorising without referencing it or acknowledging it, is also problematic and patronising. (Constanza Pauchulo)

But I feel like sometimes we are not doing that honouring of the knowledge...and we are reinventing the wheel. I feel like sometimes in the North...maybe some of them come in via kind of development politics, or they come in via some of the mainstream movements and maybe they haven't done organising politics and we assume they have, and then, later on, we start to see these weird kind of ideas about power and, you know, control. That's why I say some of them are very old school. And, if we don't update that knowledge with each other, I feel like we're losing an opportunity. (Noelene Nabulivou)



There are lessons to be gained here about tapping into the work that has already been done, demonstrating humility about the limits of our knowledge, and respect for those who understand political organising.

4.3.7 Language and translation

A common issue for many Southern organisations, is the issue of language and translation, and how that can act as a form of exclusion. This includes not just colonisers' languages like English, French, Spanish or Portuguese but also Indigenous languages from across the Global South. This reflects not simply the failure of Northern organisations to translate our materials into other languages, but also the impoverishment of our movements for not being able to access the rich bodies of work done by others. The need for interpretation was also raised by some of our interviewees:

[Without translation in] global forums or meetings... there are really few people from Latin America,...that can actually participate or join to raise their hands and have a voice and speak in Spanish. It is very important for inclusiveness. (Patricia Miranda)

Our interviewees also observed that communication is not just about language and translation but also about the way ideas are conveyed:

I think that national groups didn't identify with the message [of a former global campaign]...I think it didn't get through in all countries in the South because we wouldn't be able to translate the message since in Spanish and for our realities, it didn't have the same political message and relevance. It was really hard. (Patricia Miranda)


A connected issue is tone in communications:

You can open those doors in different ways – the timing, the power dynamics and the modes of how you open those doors also makes a difference. And just the softness of how you communicate it as well. And I think this is a cultural thing [that] makes a difference. (Crystal Simeoni)

4.3.8 Addressing different contexts and cultures

Recognising diversity is an important practical consideration for working collectively across different contexts, regions and cultures:

If you want to centre those groups in those regions, then work around their schedule. Recognise that not everybody is doing a Saturday, Sunday weekend. Recognise that there are other public holidays that are not Christmas. (Sanam Amin)



From the South, really, perhaps [they've] not been able to be quite as engaged as they would want to be because of the limitations that they have due to technology. So that digital divide is also something that perhaps we would need to consider. (Caroline Othim)

For some in the Global South, it might be much easier to relate and work with BIPOC staff in Northern organisations, particularly those from a relevant diaspora, due to perceived shared values and ways of communicating, although care should be taken not to generalise that all BIPOC share common values and experiences:

I sometimes find it easier to relate to a person of colour working in a Northern organisation. There are things I don't have to explain, ways of communication that are sometimes easier and most times a shared politics. (Crystal Simeoni)

Balancing different cultural expectations for meetings and accommodation with the stretched resources of smaller organisations based in the Global North is a challenge requiring communication and understanding amongst all involved. Time zones are another area where compromise and understanding are clearly needed, with those from Asia and the Pacific disproportionately expected to compromise. Finding times that work for all must entail recognising caring commitments and other constraints too. Holding meetings early in the morning or late at night to work across different time zones also presents a logistical, and sometimes expensive, challenge for those in both the Global South and North who are dependent on underfunded state services and do not have access to extended families with whom to share caring responsibilities.

4.3.9 Showing care and adaptability

Feminist principles can be a helpful approach for how we collectively work together. Some of our interviewees highlighted how this might play out in reality:

The Global North organisations that are established, well-placed, well-resourced are not going to suddenly sink because one donor has disappeared. Those are the ones that can say, "Okay, we're just going to do a six-hour workday. We're just going to do a three-day work week. We're going to do flexibility across the board for anybody." (Sanam Amin)

Justice-orientated work can often be exhausting with an immense impact on health and wellbeing, including the profound emotional toll for BIPOC of working on anti-racism and decolonisation – something white people cannot automatically understand. Thus, it is vital to prioritise well-being to avoid long-term burnout:

Feminists are really bad at this. You've got to look after your well-being, and that can mean many, many different things... So there's something about really understanding...that you're doing this collectively, and by looking after each other. It's also making sure it's not getting to the point of being burnt out, but

having processes and moments to make sure that everybody is well as possible on the way. (Pontso Mafethe)

Recognising the power contexts in which we all operate, it is clear that Northern organisations need to adapt our approaches, based on continued learning, so that we become better allies to those in the Global South. Having considered some of the more specific ways of doing this, we now turn to the more fundamental question of what, if any, the role of Northern organisations can and should be in combatting global injustices.

5. What is the role of organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’?

At the start of this paper, we identified the often-damaging role that many Northern organisations play in perpetuating neo-colonial power imbalances, the substantial influence they have due to their access to resources, and the extent to which the corporatisation of larger organisations drains resources away from the Global South. Clearly, it is time for organisations based in the Global North to critically evaluate and change the roles that we play.

There was fairly universal consensus among our interviewees that organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’ have a responsibility to **challenge** and hold our governments, and corporations headquartered in our countries, to account for past and present harm done internationally and domestically. At least for many of us in the UK, the legacy of colonialism is a strong imperative to act:

*It is because of the legacy of colonialism and its perpetuation that you **must** act, [that] action **has** to focus on using your privilege and your positionality to challenge those very institutions and processes. For instance, advocacy of Southern agendas with your Northern governments, challenging **your** governments’ support of processes that lead to egregious harms whether they are issues in trade agreements, or sale of arms to countries that perpetuate conflict on marginalised groups in the Global South, like for instance in Yemen. (Priyanthi Fernando)*

Others felt there was still a valuable **redistributive** role to play, but one that eschewed any notion of charity in favour of an understanding of the historical legacies that have given those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ access to resources and a responsibility to return them:

The main approach that all the solidarity organisations of the Global North [has] to be based on [is] sharing knowledge and sharing contacts, sharing political analysis. (Verónica Montúfar)



Interviewees also stressed that organisations based in the Global North are far from monolithic. For some organisations, moving away from a ‘charity’ approach is a natural continuation of the progress they are already making, but for others, this will be a major change – not just in the way they operate but in the very structures of organisations and mandates. For this, they could learn from Southern-based collectives such as [RESURJ](#), that regularly revisit feminist accountability practices. Whether all organisations are capable of such fundamental change continues to be a matter of speculation, with questions posed as to whether some should step back, and ultimately close down.

We first explore in more detail the ‘challenger’ role that organisations should play, before considering the current state of redistributive practices amongst organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’, and the potential for change. We conclude with a discussion of collective action in global advocacy as a possible way forward.

5.1 Holding Northern power brokers to account

That those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ should take responsibility for the actions of their governments was echoed loud and clear across our interviews. The imperative to act is derived from the recognition of past and present injustices, and the need for atonement, reparations and the prevention of future harm. Any sense of legitimacy in advocacy then comes from this responsibility to hold Global North political institutions and corporations to account, rather than from representing ‘partners’ from the Global South:

Northern organisations [hold a specific power] because they're electorates. They elect leaders and public officials into office. So, in that respect alone, they have the power of getting the attention of decision-makers and pushing for change.
(Mae Buenaventura)

This responsibility extends to challenge the international institutions dominated by Northern governments:

You may be based in Brussels and you have access to the [European] Parliament, to some of the ministers and rightfully so as a citizen, as a taxpayer, you can bring up the issues versus someone who's in the Global South who has to wait for an opportunity for consultation. (Memory Kachambwa)

Recognising the need for atonement and reparations moves away from the neo-colonial relationships surrounding aid, and its power relationships. Redressing and removing power imbalances in funding is a meaningful step towards more genuine dialogue, echoing an advocacy approach more often found in the 1990s for example with the ‘50 Years is Enough’ Campaign.

Challenging power also needs to go beyond insider advocacy to build social movements nationally that address underlying and hidden power structures, recognising the long-



term and complex nature of this work. Accepting this responsibility requires a focus on changing social and political norms and ideology in the Global North, not just influencing the current government in the immediate term. This kind of educational work was common among UK agencies in the 1980s, and in the anti-Apartheid and Central America solidarity movements of the 1980s and 1990s, but they have been largely replaced by INGO campaigns too often focused on engaging individual supporters and less on reflection. With the rise of far-right groups across Europe and the USA, the need for more transformative political activism has become all the more apparent:

We are expecting from Global North actors to undertake their responsibility, their historical role at this moment, first is a call as citizens. They cannot just show up just one day to vote and then feel, oh, there's a catastrophe. We have fascist regimes all over the place. It's like, no, you, you haven't done your work on the ground in the territory, right? (Emilia Reyes)

Harnessing and coordinating consumer and investor power to influence TNC actions is another form of advocacy that can avoid many of the paternalist or neo-colonial pitfalls of some of the more traditional advocacy directed at Northern governments.

Dilemmas and suggestions


In challenging Northern power brokers to take responsibility for their actions, there is a danger that advocacy could become delinked from 'Southern-led' priorities. The building of trust and common agendas (see section 4.2) will help avoid this pitfall.

In addition, many of the Global North actors that are engaged in this kind of work argue for the need to make links with domestic activism in their own countries, whether formally through their organisations or outside of their paid employment. This helps develop a political understanding of the work that is needed – the impacts of white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy and neo-colonialism, even if the manifestations are different. It also alleviates some of the paternalism and problematisation of the Global South, recognising that there are also injustices within Northern societies:

Poverty, [gender-based violence], malnutrition, homelessness in the Global North are all issues that are symptomatic of the same systemic problems of capitalist, patriarchal, militarist, white supremacist systems that Global South actors want to organise against. Global North advocacy could better reflect this interconnectedness. (Sanam Amin)

5.2 Redistributing assets, information, and power

Northern organisations frequently describe their role in terms of sharing resources, whether these be finances, information or access to power brokers. This section therefore interrogates the ways in which those with 'Global North power and privilege' act as redistributors of resources, considers how this work can reinforce neo-colonial power relationships, and suggests ways forward. The end goal for some is a truer form



of allyship with Southern movements; the question though is whether ultimately this is a realistic objective, or whether some organisations should be closing down their operations entirely.

5.2.1 Financial grants

Supporting Southern organisations, especially women’s rights organisations, to get the flexible, long-term core funding they need for progressive work is often cited as a useful role for Northern organisations. Advocating for increased and improved funding is generally welcomed, along with efforts to make funding more transparent and accessible.


The resources that we have access to as Northern organisations, how do we make sure that those resources actually do reach where the work is being done in the Global South? (Dinah Musindarwezo)

That said, concerns persist about the role of these organisations in acting as intermediaries, channelling resources through sub-grants. Due to language, location, human resources, insider knowledge and rigid funder norms, Global North organisations are more able to obtain financing from most types of donors. Much has already been written about the way funding relationships inevitably confer power on the funder, potentially allowing them to skew the priorities of the grantee while siphoning off resources for INGO’s overheads and direct costs (see for example [AWID](#), [Mama Cash](#) and [JASS](#)):

The mindset has to change in the whole sector, we privilege the funding over everything else...we are the ones who are going to make the change and us making the change is as important as your funding. (Priyanthi Fernando)

Some organisations have tried to become a ‘resource ally’ – modelling and advocating for improved funding models, including flexible and rapid-response funding, changes in onerous funding application processes, and changes in monitoring and evaluation models. Another suggestion was that Northern organisations can also help to fill resource gaps by monitoring funding landscapes and using their experience to support proposal writing. Or they could focus on providing resources that Southern organisations cannot access directly, like funds from the general public in their national contexts rather than acting as intermediaries.

Another suggestion is that sub-grant-makers should be far more transparent about where they get money from and why. For example, after receiving a donation of US\$10 million from the Mackenzie Scott Foundation in 2022 – money garnered from the profits of Amazon, one of the world’s largest TNCs – the feminist fund FRIDA wrote a [public statement](#):



FRIDA's mission in the philanthropic ecosystem is to challenge the norms and practices that perpetuate the existing colonial capitalist power dynamics. We work to challenge wealth and privilege and recognize that philanthropic giving exists because of inequality and exploitation. This makes our role as grant-makers and fundraisers a radically political act because we try to be intentional about who we receive money from and who we redirect it towards.


Yet, significantly, many Northern organisations are actually in competition with those in the Global South for these limited resources, largely fuelled by organisational growth targets. Northern organisations that act as intermediaries for funds from foundations and governments take away vital resources that could have gone directly to Southern organisations. Even where foundations are deliberately targeting regions in the Global South for funding, we heard criticism of INGOs setting up and using their country and regional offices to compete for funding against much smaller and less-well-resourced Southern organisations:

And what we're seeing in the way INGOs operate mostly is that they open up their offices, they keep their funding...A new trend is that INGOs that are saying that they're decolonising themselves with the inclusion agenda, or let's bring in more BIPOC people, etc. But not shifting really their practices...And I find that insulting because they are totally competing against the funding of legitimate feminist organisations who have done the work and earn their victories. (Emilia Reyes)

Dilemmas and suggestions

Even well-meaning initiatives can be problematic. Northern organisations that receive funds on behalf of consortiums and then sub-grant to other members may purport to be saving Southern partners' time, but this ignores the benefits they gain from being the main grantee. For example, in 2017, GADN offered to lead on approaching a donor with the intention of shouldering the resulting administrative work; partners in the project politely indicated that GADN would then benefit from developing a relationship with the donor as well as claiming indirect costs, and successfully took the lead instead. In another example, GADN started as the lead agency while a nascent organisation was created as part of the project. Despite writing into the grant agreement that any renewal would go to the newly created Southern organisation, GADN still benefitted in resources and donor relationships regardless. GADN is now trialling better ways to recognise the expertise and labour of Southern feminists with remuneration for consultation or commissioning consultants, or by sharing resources as one-off contributions with no reporting relationships, but such initiatives cover only very small amounts of money at this stage.

Those with 'Global North power and privilege' also have the option to step back altogether from funding relationships, using their existing relationships with funders to connect them with Southern actors. Indeed, some foundations already prefer to fund



Southern organisations directly, and INGOs must accept and adapt to this new reality rather than fighting to change it.

5.2.2 Access to information and contacts

Many Northern organisations describe ‘capacity strengthening’ for Southern actors as part of their work. This term itself is fraught with difficulties, essentially perpetuating colonial logics about where knowledge is produced and housed. There is a continuing perception that technical expertise is in Northern organisations and that those in the Global South are expected to be the activists or ‘on the ground’ service providers with knowledge of ‘case studies’. This ‘comparative advantage’ type approach, outlined in section 4.3.5, serves to maintain Northern actors in the more powerful and better-remunerated roles with those in the Global South providing the ‘stories’.

Redistributing or sharing this privileged access to information and contacts could be done more reflectively. One suggested way forward is to ensure that the resources provided by Global North organisations are demand-led, a concept used by the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) to denote making expertise public for others to use if they so choose. A more collaborative approach to divisions of labour could be possible, providing a demand-led service based partly on proximity to institutions or processes and developing mutual learning and capacity strengthening, a way forward already reflected in a number of South-South movements. Such mutual learning also requires more humility than is often demonstrated:

We forget that we need our capacity also built as people coming from Global North organisations. Because actually, we have a lot to gain from people working on these issues and living them daily... Their knowledge, I think, is richer. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

Alternatively, Southern actors might commission or sub-grant to Global North organisations to provide a service, defining what they really value in the relationship. While these arrangements go some way toward challenging existing power relations, they are not straightforward, and Northern actors may still build up their own expertise and, if their branding is used, their reputation.

5.2.3 Facilitating access to decision-makers

Many Northern-based organisations see their role as sharing access to decision-makers, either by facilitating spaces for Southern actors to speak or by promoting advocacy messages of organisations in the Global South. Particularly in relation to international organisations and processes that take place in the Global North, they may also play the role of sharing relevant information and analysis:

There's giving voice and platform to allies in the Global South, whether it'd be in advocacy spaces or in decision-making spaces or in our outputs, or to our funders, or whatever way that we can. (Kate Donald)



Northern organisations have better access to their governments and international decision-makers as well as information about processes and opportunities to influence, and Northern governments are also more likely to listen to their electorates, albeit complemented by evidence and testimony from the Global South:

And it is done together because there's something that people based especially at the centre of where policymakers sit, there is also value they bring because they are there every day. So, they're able to gather intelligence that probably when you're seated far away from that centre, you are not able to gather that information as quickly as possible to influence policy decisions in a timely manner. There is that role in terms of gathering intelligence quickly and tapping into existing relationships with policymakers. (Dinah Musindarwezo)

Thus, opening spaces for Southern advocacy by persuading decision-makers to listen to Southern advocates, inviting Southern speakers to meetings, or making space on panels is something many Northern organisations say they are keen to do, while others describe sharing knowledge and experience of advocacy processes. Bringing Southern organisations and grassroots women's rights organisations into spaces like the annual Commission on the Status of Women in New York, especially where they might not have the required United Nations accreditation, or where Northern organisations may have extensive experience navigating that advocacy process, was a way some of our interviewees provided support.

But Northern organisations should be careful in giving 'advice', particularly where it is designed to protect their own access to decision-makers or funding. Key here is the difference between providing useful information about government processes and priorities and instructing Global South actors on what issues to raise or tone to use:

Don't tell Southern speakers how to relate to your government – give them information about your government but let them decide. (Noelene Nabulivou)

Moreover, many Southern advocates have no need for such 'support'; often they have their own relationships with Northern governments and international forums. Some are internationally recognised in their field with strong histories of successful advocacy and without a need for 'intermediaries'. Nor do Southern advocates necessarily prioritise Northern decision-makers or spaces, focusing instead on regional and national processes, and Northern organisations must be careful of tokenism or co-opting Southern speakers to legitimise our own work and priorities. We are aware that sometimes Southern actors feel they should respond positively to requests to join meetings to support Northern allies, rather than because it is a strategic use of their time. Reflection is also needed as to whether Northern organisations' demands for their governments to include Southern organisations and feminists in one-off set piece 'consultation' meetings is really a strategic use of anyone's time. Ensuring this is part of



a longer-term collective strategy, with proper briefing and remuneration, could ensure this process is less extractive.

In other cases, however, it may not be safe for those based in certain parts of the Global South to speak on a particular issue, leaving a careful role for Northern actors to lead with the express consent of Southern organisations and actors:

In many cases, we use our Northern partners to push advocacy forward with cases and campaigns that we work on from the ground, especially when it comes to the IFIs' Boards of Directors where they can have access to influence their government representative. (Shereen Talaat)

Some Global North-based international processes, such as the G7, have disproportionate and illegitimate influence but are not priorities for Global South actors – in part because their governments are not represented. Here, they may consider it a useful form of allyship for Northern organisations to target these forums and amplify their demands.

5.2.4 Sunsetting

Whether organisations with 'Global North power and privilege' are capable of making the changes needed remains a matter of debate. Some of our interviewees argued that the logical conclusion of Northern organisations stepping back is moving towards ultimately closing down – a process Sachini Perera termed 'sunsetting':

We hear about decentralising but that is still while maintaining the INGO structure. Is there space to completely reimagine the INGO? Can there be sunsetting for INGOs so that they are working towards certain timeframes while also ensuring sustainability for movements beyond their own lifetime? (Sachini Perera)

The German organisation [Medico](#) states on its website: *"We help make aid superfluous. Together we want to eliminate the conditions that create misery and injustice, making ever more aid necessary."* But this is not a universal view shared across the wider sector. In practice, Northern organisations appear to have an inbuilt imperative not just to survive but to grow – an imperative that at least some in the Global South find highly problematic:

Global North development organisations are not planning to close up shop – and they should at least outline how and when they plan to do so, not that they need to abruptly shut down and fire everyone, but that they need to look at what are the functions they are performing and build towards handing those over and divesting their funds. Global North INGOs need to always be asking whether they are in fact the best actor to achieve the goals they have set out for themselves. (Sanam Amin)



5.3 Collective action and global coalition-building

Collective action is central for building, organising and mobilising power for systemic transformative change. Indeed, many of those we interviewed considered movement-building at the local, national and regional levels to be central to their work. Despite, or perhaps because of, the continuing damage done by inherent power imbalances, there was a broad consensus among those consulted on the need to move away from South-North binaries and work more cooperatively globally.

We are comrades globally. We are building the global movement together. That cannot happen from the South alone or from the North alone. Here it doesn't matter where you come from. What matters is what you believe in. (Shereen Talaat)


For many Northern actors, working in global coalitions feels like an obvious way to build collective power while also avoiding some of the paternalist and neo-colonial relationships inherent in redistributive approaches.

The concept of 'global feminist movements' loosely depicts this imperative to connect and build collective power, while acknowledging diversity. For GADN and many of our contributors, working within and through such movements that share feminist values is vitally important, while recognising the power imbalances and deep fissures and continued dominance of Northern organisations that terms like 'global movements' or 'coalitions' risk obfuscating.

In the context of neo-colonialism and deep inequalities between and within the Global South and North, coalition work certainly brings challenges. Collective action is not always positive, particularly when it serves to perpetuate the exclusion, glossing over or erasure of Southern actors and their experiences. Collaboration takes many forms, but it is clear that before rushing to create formal coalitions, trusting relationships based on common agendas and paradigms must be established (as outlined in section 4.2).

Some donors continue to assume that the work of coordinating 'global' coalitions will be done in the Global North while the Global South does regional or national work, with grants allocated accordingly. Increasingly, hosting and doing the administrative work – often understood as the 'unglamorous' side – of global coalition-building has come to be seen as a valuable role for Northern organisations. But questions have been raised as to why these resources shouldn't be transferred to the Global South, especially given that administrative roles usually come with power to determine agendas and spending decisions, even for processes that aspire to be participatory.

There has also been a proliferation of groupings as different agencies or donors try to create yet another new coalition, with many of the same people being invited to multiple gatherings 'brought together' by different Global North actors – whether to meet a funding



deliverable or ensure a place at the table. This has tended to create an additional burden on a small number of actors, while potentially excluding many others.

In our interviews, the need to build Pan-African regional cooperation before then moving towards global coalitions was identified. Others suggested that lessons could also be learned from the thematic networks on debt, taxation, trade and from international workers' rights and other movements:

The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition has tried having a couple of Global North 'host' organisations handling the grant and reporting for the network, while hiring coordination staff from the Global South. (Sanam Amin)

The question remains as to whether Northern organisations will step back from their domination of formal global coalitions, but for now, our interviewees concurred that it was worth trying to build more decentralised coalitions to properly harness the power of collective action. Starting slowly, building up trust and identifying allies with similar values were common themes, as was being intentional about how a coalition is formed and what is required.

Moving forward, one necessary step appears to be questioning the assumption that 'global' coalition-building should be done by those based in the Global North, with more reflection by Northern actors as to our motivations and what role to play. Below are some of the questions raised for consideration:

- Do we really need another coalition, or can we join an existing one or act as allies to one led by organisations or movements in the Global South?
- What is motivating us to create a coalition or grouping? Is it meaningful collaboration towards common goals – or is ensuring ourselves a seat at the table, meeting a funder's deliverables or giving ourselves legitimacy by showing we work with organisations from the Global South?
- Are we arguing that 'global work' is important because, without this role, it is no longer clear what our function is?
- Would it ultimately be better for us to focus on our governments while Global South actors are resourced to do global work?
- In trying to create global coalitions, are we pulling overstretched feminists and other activists away from national and regional work?
- If a coalition is needed, how can we reduce our power within it? Are there others who could lead? Within formal decision-making processes, what have we done to recognise and address our own hidden power?



6. Concluding observations

Here we collate the main issues that have emerged for us throughout this paper, and in its development. Alongside each issue are questions that we, as GADN, have asked ourselves as part of this process. We also suggest other organisations and individuals with ‘Global North power and privilege’ ask themselves these questions as part of their work in combatting global injustices and recognise our responsibility to make the change. As authors of this paper, we want to reemphasise here that we recognise that examining these questions is not a one-time checklist; rather, this interrogation needs to be part of an ongoing effort to reflect on our work and role as Northern organisations. Critically, this reflection must also be followed by action to correct harmful power dynamics, however challenging that may be, if those of us with ‘Global North power and privilege’ are to become part of the solution rather than the problem.

Recognising and understanding global power contexts

As individuals and organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’, the starting point in interrogating our roles must be recognition of the power contexts in which we work – namely, neo-colonial, capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchy. In so doing we need to move beyond a simple dichotomy of Global North and Global South; using the frame of ‘Global North power and privilege’ can help to clarify how we as organisations and individuals benefit from unequal power structures and relations to the drivers of harm. This in turn may help navigate the complexities of ‘decentralisation’.

- From what kind of ‘Global North power and privilege’ do you think you benefit, as both an individual and as an organisation?

Questioning underlying motivations for involvement in global justice work

A charity approach to international development work, rooted in pity, perpetuates colonial relations. Responsibility and atonement for past and present harm, and some forms of solidarity, have been proposed as more transformative drivers for those with ‘Global North power and privilege’.

- Why are you or your organisation engaged in combatting global injustices? Are you motivated by responsibility and solidarity rather than charity? If so, what implications does this have for the way you or your organisation works?

Holding our Northern power brokers to account

An overwhelming response during the research for this paper was that organisations with ‘Global North power and privilege’ have a duty to challenge our governments and corporations for their role and responsibility in perpetuating global injustices, recognising also that we have benefitted from this injustice.

- Are you or your organisation taking responsibility for holding your governments and corporations to account? If so, how does that change the operations of your organisation?

Changing the way resources are redistributed

At least in the short term, there may also continue to be a redistributive role for those with 'Global North power and privilege' in sharing or returning resources to the Global South, while being intentional about who benefits. However, in so doing there is a strong danger of reinforcing colonial relationships that sustain the status quo. Ultimately for many Northern-based organisations, there may be a need to 'sunset', gradually transferring their intermediary roles, assets and power to organisations in the Global South that work to dismantle structural oppressions, focusing instead on holding Northern governments to account. This may require reconsidering the in-built corporate imperative for growth that stands in the way of such a change for many organisations.

- What is your organisation doing that could be better done by an organisation located in the Global South? Is your organisation's work actually redressing power inequalities – or reinforcing them? Should you consider sunsetting?

Applying 'Southern-led' approaches

For those with 'Global North power and privilege', improving our current practices is essential no matter which role we seek to play in combatting global injustice. This requires being led by the demands and analysis of those most affected by structural oppressions in the Global South who are leading the challenge and producing systemic solutions. Just having Southern 'partners' may not be enough unless accompanied by deeper changes to the underpinning analysis and operations. Challenging power imbalances – particularly in funding relationships – will also start to allow us all to move towards more equal and truly collaborative working relationships built on long-term trust and shared political analysis. For all of us – whether in the Global South or North – this requires intentionality as to who we choose to work with, what their political analysis is, and who in turn they represent.

Ending extractive practices, not least in consultation processes, and challenging the current division of labour between supposed Northern policy expertise and Southern 'lived experiences' will be key. Being good advocacy allies also requires more radical positions and the courage to use – and potentially lose – our own access to power in pursuit of transformative change. These changes represent a fundamental reconfiguration of organisational purposes and structures, not just a cosmetic exercise.

- What are the challenges of being 'Southern-led'? Beyond rhetoric, how can you ensure changes in your organisation's analysis and operations? How will you ensure that, in being 'Southern-led', you retain responsibility for the actions of your government and do not assume that groups in the Global South will shoulder the burden of work needed?



Taking a political approach

Underlying much of the analysis we have presented here is the political nature of this work and the power dynamics within which we all operate. Each of us, wherever we are located, must recognise our own positionality and commit to redressing the power imbalances from which we benefit. Being actively anti-racist and decolonial is part of the process, particularly for those who benefit from white supremacy and privilege. Working with local movements that tackle injustice domestically, whether as individuals or organisations, also enables those of us with 'Global North power and privilege' to identify global connections and stop problematising the Global South.

- How are you, as an organisation and individual, making global connections and using your own power and privilege to challenge injustice – in your own organisation, your community, and internationally?

For GADN, the process of writing this paper has surfaced as many questions as it has answered. Our challenge to ourselves, which we invite you to share, is to ensure that these reflections lead to real change in the way our organisations operate in global justice advocacy.

It is because of the legacy of colonialism and its perpetuation that you must act, 'action' has to focus on using your privilege and your positionality to challenge those very institutions and processes. (Priyanthi Fernando)



Appendix 1: Methodology

This discussion paper is based on a survey of relevant literature and publications, as well as on the many rich conversations amongst feminists and other activists to which we have been party over the years. To complement this body of work, between August and October 2022, we conducted one-hour-long interviews with 25 people who along with six others also peer-reviewed the resulting paper. Where there was consensus among many interviewees, we have not necessarily attributed each idea but rather sought to weave those ideas through the paper's wider analysis.

This pool of contributors includes people working in organisations located in the Global South as well as in the Global North. Some come from global or international organisations (for example, Public Services International and Global Alliance for Tax Justice) while others are moving towards internationalising (for example, Center for Economic and Social Rights and Society for International Development). Still, others are international NGOs located in and led by the Global South, such as International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific. Some identified as hybrid, with registrations in multiple locations (Just Associates) or as cross-regional (Regions Refocus). A number of our contributors are not currently affiliated with any organisation but possess extensive experience doing global advocacy work.

Our contributors also include a combination of BIPOC and white people, some of whom live and work in majority-white countries and others in Global South countries. This make-up of respondents helped us observe the ways that race, class and gender play out and shape power relations within and between countries. A full list of contributors can be found in the acknowledgements. We are grateful to all the interviewees who shared their doubts and confusion with us as well as their successes, and to those who so clearly outlined challenges to those of us working in the Global North.

Our contributors are in no way a representative sample, and we are aware of glaring gaps. For example, our historic working relationships and the fact that the interviews were conducted in English meant that we did not have as many interviewees as we would have liked from Latin American, West African or Southwest Asian and North African ([SWANA](#)) organisations. Furthermore, not everyone with relevant experience has time or capacity to meet with us. In recognition of the expertise shared by those who did, we paid organisations located in the Global South and independent interviewees for their time, but not interviewees from organisations located in the Global North. Getting this balance of consultation and responsibility has been a constant theme throughout this work.

In interviews, we found it relatively easy to identify the things that are going wrong and find consensus around high-level and theoretical principles. That said, moving beyond theory to interrogating practical realities, and how to get from where we are now to where we want to be, brought layers of complexity to the fore. Power contexts, which we discuss



in section 2, shape and constrain any actions we try to take. Ultimately, however, this is an issue for those with 'Global North power and privilege' to spend time getting right, guided by the experiences and perspectives of Global South organisations and actors.

Appendix 2: Resources

Funding

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