



CASE STUDY:

THE PATH TO A DECOLONISED PAY SCALE AT PURPOSEFUL

INTRODUCTION

Feminist NGO Purposeful's journey to decolonise its pay scales offers useful insights for those interested in applying a feminist lens to salary structures. We collaborated with the team at Purposeful to explore what they did, why they did it and what effect it had.

THE CASE STUDY

When it comes to equitable approaches to salary in international organisations, the question of where staff are based is central. Some organisations argue that it's only fair to adjust salary to the local cost of living since vast differences in rent and other costs between and even within countries affect how much someone needs to live well. Others argue that this model justifies paying staff in the global majority of countries less for the same work. They also make the point that staff in many global majority countries don't benefit from quality free social services (in the form of free or subsidised healthcare and education) in the same way that staff in many parts of the global minority do. This means that staff in the global majority world might need to stretch their salaries even further.

Feminist organisation [Purposeful](#) has been through a process of starting to decolonise its pay scales. They say: "When we were ready to make our first hires in Sierra Leone in 2016, we simply contacted our friends and partners in other NGOs in Sierra Leone and offered competitive rates benchmarked on what others were paying. As we began to build a team outside Sierra Leone, we offered more money, based on the prevailing markets in the country we were hiring. **And just like that, with little thought, we had adopted a colonised pay scale.** All the while we were advocating for a decolonised global development system based on solidarity and love, we were reinforcing the same practices we critiqued."





That's when Purposeful decided to make changes. This involved many discussions, exploring different salary models and thinking about what equity really meant. They grappled with some difficult questions – for example, some staff benefited from generational wealth, whereas others did not. Should this structural power dynamic be taken into account in the ways salaries were worked out?

They considered the financial burdens many people living in global majority countries faced that others did not – for example, some staff in Sierra Leone were supporting school fees for multiple family members. They said: "It became very complicated and we realised it wasn't workable to set salaries based on individual circumstances. Instead, the best option for us in terms of decolonising our payscale was paying people based on the role they have, rather than where they are based or their passport."

Other key decisions were to try to minimise the gaps between salary bands and not to give raises based on performance. Purposeful recognised that performance-based pay risked favouring people who were more visible to senior management or might disproportionately benefit those with roles for whom work 'achievements' were more quantifiable or 'tangible'. Instead, all staff are given annual pay increases as well as salary increments at the time of promotion.

The organisation also invests in its discretionary benefits packages, reminding us that compensating staff is not all about salary allowance. Purposeful's benefits package includes provisions for study leave, funding for further education, time off for miscarriage or abortion, as well as logistical and financial support for staff living in territories where abortion is criminalised or limited in access.

So what's the impact of all these changes? There are of course financial implications, such as higher overheads for the organisation, which Purposeful has the privilege of being able to manage thanks to the flexibility of their donors, particularly those donors that are private philanthropy foundations in the US. It has been harder to fully recover the costs of the new pay scale with other donors, for example bilateral funders. Internally, the impact has been profound. Purposeful says: "**Decolonising our pay scales has increased our ability to be in truth with each other. We can show up with each other with more honesty than before. In the past, some of us might have felt we had to hide our salaries. We have let go of this shame. We are able to mutually show up in pride.**"

Purposeful emphasises that this approach to transforming their salary structures took several years to develop and is still not 'perfect'. Like many of us, they continue on a journey to ensure their internal practices mirror what they are trying to achieve externally.

