

## **Episode title: The Problem with Partnerships: It starts in your mind - transcript**

**Gunjan:** *The impact that this neocolonialism has on each one of us is so visible.*

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**Raaval:** Welcome to the Problem with Partnerships, a Building Peace podcast series from Peace Direct.

I'm Raaval Singh Bains, your host for this series exploring how to decolonise the system of international cooperation - that's the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sector.

We're following up on Peace Direct's guide to Transforming Partnerships, which outlined ways we can build equitable partnership between local activists and international NGOs and funders in the sector. To build better partnerships, we must address the problems holding us back – systemic racism, White Supremacy, and racialised power imbalances.

Today, we're talking about mindsets. The way in which we each think and interact with the world. The biases we hold that shape our approach to different communities.

And how we can change to support greater equality and decolonise our minds.

George Floyd's murder in 2020 triggered a reckoning with racism in the West. For many individuals, it prompted serious personal reflection on their own conscious and unconscious biases. But it was also a moment that demanded reflection on structural and systemic racism. The ways problematic attitudes have shaped our national and global structures – including the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sector.

We learned that our sector has a serious problem with racism, and that we desperately need to decolonise our work. There are many practical changes we need to make, but Peace Direct's research has proven that decolonisation must start with challenging our own current mindsets in our sector. This includes addressing racism, White Supremacy and Saviourism, elitism, and other harmful attitudes.

For some in our sector, these attitudes are hard to identify. But we know that INGOs and funders in the Global North – that's traditional power-holding countries like the UK and US – often see ourselves as superior to the colleagues and communities we work with in countries like Mali or Syria in the Global South. Our sector has historically imagined itself as the saviour of people in these contexts, and perpetuated the narrative that these communities cannot thrive without our intervention.

And as we wrote in *Transforming Partnerships*, these 'neo-colonial attitudes and practices entrench power inequalities, undermine trust, and erode the agency, independence and dignity' of local communities and activists.

In our research consultations, both Global South and Global North participants agreed the change in mindsets needs to take place. But working on these foundational elements is arguably the most challenging task. And it's one our sector is clearly struggling with. Four years after our first report highlighting these issues, we are still making the same recommendation.

Part of the challenge is that changing mindsets is likely to be a painful process. It's deep, internal and personal work – unpacking layers of belief and bias that we've held, perhaps without realising, throughout our lives. It means confronting the narratives that have been perpetuated by our sector since it began. Yet without doing this deeper work, all other reform efforts that focus on changing practices are likely to fail – much like building a house on poor foundations.

So, this episode, we're asking: what are the mindsets our sector holds? Where did they come from? And why does decolonisation demand that we unpick them? Why start here, instead of with practical changes?

**Gunjan:** I go back to India, because that's where I come from.

**Raaval:** Gunjan Veda is the Executive Director of the Movement for Community-Led Development, or MCLD. It's a network that works to shift power so that low-income communities can achieve their own visions and goals.

**Gunjan:** We've had policies criminalising caste-based discrimination for forever. Has it solved the problem of caste in India? It absolutely hasn't solved it. I mean, think about what's happening in the US, the violence that people experience here, right, that Black people experience. Don't you have policies and laws? What has that changed? It's the mindset that needs to change, right? Until people believe that all human beings have the right to a life of dignity, until people believe that there is value in each and every human being, until people believe that we have something to learn from each other. And it doesn't matter how literate or illiterate, how educated or uneducated, what language, what clothes you wear, what lifestyle you have, and which part of the world you come from, until we shift that within ourselves, this system will never go away because this system exists, not because of just policy level issues. Policies are a reflection of people's perceptions, and what people think. Policies, maybe to some extent, influence perception. But they're really the product of perceptions and thoughts of people and how people think and view these things.

Development funding comes mostly from Minority World organisations.

**Raaval:** Minority world is another term to describe the Global North – those traditional power-holders in the international system. The Global South, or the Majority World, refers

to those who are deprived of power, often due to a history of being colonised and plundered by the Global North.

**Gunjan:** the bilaterals, who are in the minority world have to respond to the taxpayers. Most of the taxpayers still genuinely believe that they are superior to people in the majority world just because they don't speak the language that they speak or they haven't had the same education, university education that they have. So those belief systems still exist.

**Chernor** It is not an accident that we have the challenges you're talking about. It is because it was designed in this way.

**Raaval:** This is Chernor Bah. Chernor recently became the Minister of Information and Civic Education in Sierra Leone. He's also the Co-founder of [Purposeful](#), a feminist hub for girls' activism, rooted in Africa and working all around the world.

**Chernor:** the very foundation of our sector, the very basis of the sector is racist, is colonial. And the problem is, it therefore produces racist colonial patriarchy, that's what you get. When the entire sector is rooted in that and there's no efforts or very little to acknowledge it, to acknowledge the harm that is created because of it, and the systematic oppression, and discrimination that emerges out of it. Because this is its roots.

I think as constructionist, I understand that nothing is by accident, that somebody created that. And I think the first step to liberation, is to understand the root cause. I think many, many philosophies is you have to understand the root cause of this oppression. I think the reason why that is critical, in my mind, is because even in that relationship between us, and folks in the Global North, there is this inherent assumption that somehow they are superior. That's why they are better. That's why their countries have more resources. That's where, you know, there's all these racist thoughts about the superior gene and superior race and all that, but that is grossly misleading. And it's part of the colonised package to let you believe that. But no, it's a product of oppression. It's a product of plunder.

What passes for global development was a racist venture that didn't see Black people as human beings, it didn't see people of colour as human beings, it saw us as people to be saved, it saw us as people to be cared for, saw us people to be rescued. So that informs the policies, that informs also how it is transmitted.

**Raaval:** Chernor rightly reminds us of the colonial roots of our sector, which we discussed in our first piece of research on decolonisation, *Time to Decolonise Aid*, published in 2020. We highlighted how, 'Beginning in the nineteenth century, humanitarian efforts were primarily organised by colonial powers in colonised territories, with resources distributed first to Europeans and then to colonised indigenous populations.' Colonised peoples were

considered inferior, so they were seen as needing humanitarian intervention, but were also excluded and discriminated against.

**Chernor:** it's a fact not just of history, but it's a fact of the current reality, especially the manifestations of Neo colonialism, in the ways of our ways, our relationships, capital relationships that we have, educational relationships that we have, and how all of those manifests and hold us. So I think truly liberating ourselves from that requires at least an acknowledgement that that this material manifestations exist, that this history exist.

For me, I've always been saying, first we need to acknowledge that, we need to name that. If we do that, then we will be interested in overthrowing the sector as is and not tweaking it.

And say, if you were to start afresh, and you are interested today, with everything you and I know, about ending, let's say poverty or exclusion in Africa, you will create a very different system. Girls and women will be at the forefront of it, children's voices, because we now know that's the way you lead any liberation efforts is to have the people who are most affected by the oppression, most marginalized, to be at the forefront. We know that's the way it works, we know that we will not need to beg for resources, we know that they ought to be, you know, holders of those resources. And that if you really want to truly do it in solidarity, you can move those resources in ways without strings attached, and trust them to make decisions on their own, to define how they want to author their own liberation and to let them fail in the ways that they want to and to build societies in the ways, but that's too risky. Because the whole process is not neutral. The people with money did not get their money neutrally. They got their money on the backs of oppressing other people. And they're interested in keeping the status quo.

**Raaval:** So our mindsets shape our sector from its foundations to its operations. And those attitudes manifest in a lack of trust, a lack of respect, and unequal treatment. The practical impact is that our approaches to working together are inequitable and unfair. Local activists face demeaning demands like spending hours filling out reports on their work, expected to justify every decision they make and penny they spend. But these attitudes and approaches don't just have practical implications. They also have an impact on people, on the way we see ourselves.

**Gunjan:** The impact that this neocolonialism has on each one of us is so visible. So I joined MCLD in 2019, I had received so many opportunities to work abroad, and I never accepted any of them, you know why? Because I was like, What do I have to contribute? I only know about India and the limited context of the communities I work in? What can I have to contribute and share with the world, even I, who speaks English fluently, who has had the privilege and opportunity of actually going out and studying and pursuing higher education,

both in India and abroad, who has been able to attend some of these global events and forums by virtue of the language that I have learned, and now adopted as my primary means of communication, did not have the confidence or the belief that I had anything valuable to offer, outside that limited space in which I was working, and which I knew.

With MCLD, our members are local community based organisations from all over the world, right? That's our strength. That's who we are. And I see this so often, the difference between colleagues and friends and what we call the Minority World, and The Majority World, which typically people call the Global South, as a way to remind ourselves that the Global South is where the majority of the world's population is and where the power should be. But it seldom is, it never is, right.

Activists who have spent their life working with communities, they live there they are from those communities, they know more than I would know in 20 lifetimes about what people want and need, cannot participate in forums because they don't speak English. And we never offer translation or we never imagined that the primary language of communication should be Tamil or KiSwahili, or Luganda. That's, not even an option that we consider. For them the feeling that, well, "I am not educated enough", "I don't know English". So now if this is what the system does to people like us, who enjoy varying degrees, I would say now, of influence and power, imagine what it does to the most vulnerable, the most marginalised, sitting in the communities who have in any case, been systematically made to believe that they were worth nothing, that their lives don't matter, that they have nothing concrete to offer, right?

Now, this system is now going and telling them, "You really don't know what to do, you have made a mess of your lives. And so we are here to fix it for you and to tell you how to lead your life". Imagine what it does to a person, what it does to your idea of self. Imagine what it does to children to believe that their parents are not capable, that their families are not capable, that their teachers are not good enough, that they are not good enough. Imagine generation after generation, what it does to you, if it is ingrained into you that you are not good enough. So everything of value that you hold, every skill that you have, loses value.

**Raaval:** That's such a devastating reality resulting from those invisible yet tangible mindsets that we hold. We have to confront that. We have to sit with that.

We also have to find a path forward. And there is hope. Our sector has begun to change its ways. And to reckon with the beliefs we hold. A lot of that has come through the power of peer-to-peer conversations. By prompting these frank and open exchanges across the

sector, but especially within our partnerships, we can make it possible to dismantle these mindsets of oppression.

Let's listen again to Chernor, on how we can address our own mindsets, including internalised oppression, and how those at the receiving end of these undermining attitudes can reclaim power to change our sector for the better.

**Chernor:** It has to start within communities. I think the folks in the Global North - white people, frankly - need to have conversations among themselves. Discuss whiteness, and that power, that privilege in their socialisation and things that like that needs to happen. That's like a burden that can be shared in their community amongst themselves. And then I think we need to have different kinds of conversations as well like some of the things to just been alluding to, and for us about how to organise, how do we see ourselves? I always say to my friends that we are complicit in our dehumanisation, and we have way more power than we realise. Because we accept these pittance, tokens that are offered to us. And knowing not knowing that if we organise and be like, No, we're not going to be part of your process. We're not going to be your token and that we have the power to shake the system, but we are not doing that either as well.

It's about decolonizing what you've been taught in education. Understanding your place in history, that you're part of a continuum, and that you're not just, you know, outside of the continuum of history, and that where you are, is a product of a lot of things, relationships, and power and exploitation and all of that. I think that realisation that awakening is so critical, it's the foundation of all liberation work, it's an enlightenment about who you are and your place and that you're valued and all that and and that's the hard part. That's the, that's the bit about the organisation that needs to happen, right? In communities. When you work with marginalised communities, for example, is to really convince and work with them to understand that this characterization of you powerless, is part of the oppression, right? This characterization of us, this is how it is and you should be stuck outside of the door, is exactly how they want it. Your acceptance of it as what can I do about it? That's exactly how the system was designed to keep you out. And the first stage is how do you realise that no you are, you are worthy and you are something, but beyond that, because I want to make clear on this question of how you say no, because I purposefully said no to a lot of money. We say no to a lot of kinds of resources that we say these kinds of resources will not allow us to do our work and allow us to be free. It could be a lot of money. But it will be oppressive. It will not allow us to engage with activists in the ways that we want to. That's a lot of power. It's a lot of privilege, especially now, in a sector where having access to resources is premium, right? It's like you're socialised to just chase the money, because that's basically what it is.

But there are two things. One is what I just refer to as the political education. B is I think, the power to organise the way you resist and say no, and say, I'm not going to your panel, I'm not taking your money is you have to organise, you've got to have your peers and people that think like you, I think it's a fun, it's, it's so important. You have to you have to blend together and share that liberatory thinking with your peers and agree that no, we're not going to accept this, this is not who we are, we're better than this. And that together, we're gonna hold the line here. Because you can't do it alone. If you do it alone, you're just an outlier. And you're done. And there's a lot of labour that is required to do that collective radical reimagination. To do it together, to find people to work with, together to do that. And to then take a stance together and be like, Okay, we, this is who we are, we are worthy. And we're going to take a stance and we're going to say no, and going forward, we're not going to accept this kind of money going for I think, once we begin, this is the this is I think it's the fine points. Once we are able to do that craft that and organise ourselves I think we can actually push back a lot on the sector we can change a lot in this world, but that those two things I think are critical.

**Raaval:** So there is still hope to change these mindsets, and it starts with us, at an individual level. And that can have a domino effect, to create change in the system, bring an end to the oppression that it perpetuates.

**Gunjan:** All of us are part of propagating that system. So one thing is that, think very carefully about where do we continue to promote these colonial practices.

Second, believe in your own power, and ask for it.

I was, **you know**, speaking to some organisation from Africa the other day, **and** from Kenya, and they were saying that they have a partnership charter, they decide the terms of partnership, **they decide**, and if somebody wants to work with them, they have to realise whether or not it's acceptable to them, you know, so it's not the funder, setting the terms alone. I, as a local organisation have a right to set my terms, because what I bring is valuable. And if you want to work with me, you have to meet my terms and conditions, right? That's what people who are sought after do, right? So we have to do the same because our knowledge matters, and without our knowledge and our experience, funders and INGOs and others cannot do the work that is being done. And I think the third thing that I would say is that we are all clamouring for those few seats, that funders and others from the minority world have opened up for us.

You know, it's the classic case of what the British is at one point used - divided and rule. So we are competing with each other for those select few seats, instead of standing together and saying, why do we only have the select few seats, we should have 50% of the seats. It's

not a matter of who amongst us, it's a matter of changing the shape of that table. That's what we need to do together. And we need to trust each other to be working for that same agenda. Because not all of us can be in all the spaces that trust is missing amongst us. And we need to go back and find that because if we cannot build a community, if we cannot find that trust, we will not be able to survive.

**Conclusion:**

**Raaval:** Thanks for tuning in to this episode of the Problem with Partnerships.

Take a look at the shownotes for an action pack of resources to support you in your journey to decolonise. We hope you continue to join us for the rest of the series, as we continue to explore the elements that make a partnership equitable, sustainable, and most importantly, fair. Next time, we'll be discussing the core values at the heart of partnership: trust and respect. For now, it's been a pleasure to host you on The Problem with Partnerships. Take care.

Show notes:

Veronique bio

Nicoline bio

Gunjan bio

Chernor bio