FEMME FORTE

A Paper Discussing The Action Points Highlighted From The 'Reclaiming The Frame' Webinar

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Femme Forte Uganda is powered by community, care, and collective action.

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Greetings!

We are a feminist movement-building organization dedicated to advancing economic, social, and political power for women. Through advocacy, innovation, and sustainable initiatives, we create opportunities for growth and leadership while fostering connections across generations to strengthen Uganda's broader women's movement.

We hope this publication inspires reflection, action, and solidarity as we work together toward a more equitable and empowered society for women.

The Femme Forte Team

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Background

The discourse on foreign aid and development in Africa is deeply intertwined with historical, political, and cultural legacies. Colonialism established structural inequalities where external powers dictated economic, social, and political priorities, a dynamic that persists in contemporary aid systems. Post-independence aid, shaped by geopolitical interests, has often prioritized donor agendas over local needs, reinforcing dependency and limiting African agency. In response, a growing movement seeks to "decolonize aid," emphasizing local ownership, self-reliance, and the reclamation of African narratives. African communities and leaders are increasingly exploring strategies that leverage internal resources, strengthen local governance, and foster collective action, challenging hierarchical and extractive patterns perpetuated by both external donors and internal elites. By prioritizing indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage, and regional collaboration, this approach envisions development that is equitable, sustainable, and reflective of Africa's own priorities, knowledge systems, and leadership, ultimately reshaping the framework through which aid and development are understood.

1. Power and Aid

The historical nature of foreign aid is deeply intertwined with colonial legacies and geopolitical interests, establishing an inherent power imbalance that continues to shape contemporary aid relationships. Early forms of foreign aid in Africa date back to the colonial era, where European powers, while extracting natural resources and exploiting local labor, also introduced infrastructure, education, and healthcare systems. This period laid a foundation where external actors defined development and controlled its mechanisms.

Following independence, foreign aid revolutionized into a tool for geopolitical competition during the Cold War, with superpowers providing aid to promote their ideological and strategic interests. The current aid system is not any different as it inherits and perpetuates power dynamics that originated from imperialistic and strategic objectives.

The circulation of power within the international aid sector, particularly concerning decisionmaking and donor dynamics is an interesting one as the relationship between donors and recipients have been characterized by an enduring asymmetry, rooted in colonial legacies and geopolitical interests, where donors wield significant influence through financial leverage and policy conditionality. This was re-iterated by Rose Wakikona, the Deputy Director at the Women's Probono Initiative who stated that those who "have" often impose conditions on those who "don't have," during 'The Reclaiming the Frame' webinar. While aspirations exist for more transformational partnerships built on mutual trust, the reality often defaults to transactional models focused on quantifiable outcomes, inadvertently strengthening existing power imbalances.

It is prudent to note that donor-driven agendas frequently overshadow local priorities, leading to fragmented efforts, inefficient resource allocation, and the perpetuation of aid dependency. Aid conditionality, while may be a tool for reform, has often prioritized the donor's interests as opposed to those of its beneficiaries. Donors largely dictate funding priorities, project design, and reporting requirements. This then leads to a funding-driven approach where local needs are secondary to donor agendas.

The structural conditions of donor funding inherently favors donor entities, that is to say that this imbalance is largely attributable to the fact that foreign aid amounts are predominantly determined by donors, and recipients often find themselves heavily dependent on this assistance.

The complex multi-actor landscape, encompassing governments, international and national

NGOs, civil society organizations, and the private sector, often reinforces these hierarchies through creating subcontracting chains. This reliance extends beyond immediate project funding to the sustenance of macroeconomic policies and expenditures, creating significant vulnerability for recipients should aid flows diminish or cease.

While there's a growing push for localization, genuine decision making power often remains concentrated at the top of the aid chain. Local communities and organizations should be consulted so that there is no detachment of stated goals and actual impact as regards to the aid. Furthermore, during 'The Reclaiming the Frame' webinar, one of the organizers, Catherine Mugabo stated that not all aid is inherently bad.

It does not go without stating that The International Covenant on Civil and Political rights states that everyone has a right to self-determination in article 1, in terms on political, economic, social and cultural development, it is under this auspices that the African region is coming up with all sorts of inventions to get rid of aid that comes with so many strings attached. This means that Africans should look for alternative development models with which they can use to raise income.

2. Role of African Communities

African communities possess immense potential to drive their own development by leveraging internal resources and fostering self-reliance, moving away from a reliance on external validation. This approach is pivotal to the growing call for "decolonizing aid," which emphasizes genuine local ownership and agency, below are some of the ways in which decolonizing aid can be practiced;

i)   Active community participation and ownership: Communities can leverage their internal resources by actively participating in every stage of project development from assessing needs and planning to budgeting, implementation, and monitoring. When projects are imposed without local input, they often fail to achieve lasting impact because they lack a genuine understanding of the end-user's needs and context. This ensures that development actions are locally informed and led.

ii) Cultivating strong local leadership and shared vision: Effective leadership from within the community, rooted in principles of trust, group care, and loyalty, is paramount. This involves leaders engaging in dialogue with community members to establish a shared vision, rather than imposing their own opinions. Such a collaborative approach

fosters deep commitment and enables communities to achieve significant goals without external assistance.

iii) Prioritizing domestic resource mobilization: Governments and communities should focus on generating revenue from internal sources, such as taxes and natural resources, which are by far the largest source of financing available to them. Grassroots organizations can also demonstrate the ability to raise funds locally, lessening their reliance on significant foreign donations.

iv) Reclaiming and valuing local knowledge and narratives: African communities can assert their agency by telling their own stories, confronting historical misrepresentations, and celebrating their rich cultural heritage. This process of reclaiming narratives helps preserve unique identities and fosters continuity and resilience against cultural homogenization.

v) Fostering regional integration and trade: A reduction in foreign assistance can be viewed as an opportunity for independent development. Strengthening intra-African trade is seen as crucial for accelerating economic growth, increasing industry competition, improving productivity, and developing local infrastructure, thereby reducing aid dependency.

2.1. Examples reflecting this potential;

i) Uganda's decentralization efforts: Uganda's constitutional reforms have focused on political decentralization, devolving planning powers to local councils through acts like the 1993 Local Government (Resistance Councils) statute and the 1997 Local Government Act. In theory, this meant districts gained more planning autonomy, ceasing to be mere arms of the central government. While challenges remain, particularly with fiscal decentralization where district finances are still largely controlled by the central government, these efforts reflect a move towards empowering local governance structures to manage their own affairs.

ii) Lessons from past failures in Uganda: The failures of projects like the Lake Katwe salt project in Uganda during the 1990s,[1] serve as stark reminders of the importance of local validation.

iii) This project failed because it was planned and implemented without a community

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1   Preliminary environmental impact assessment of Lake Katwe salt plant, Western Uganda, 1990 by Paul, Tukahirwa, Eldad M.

participatory approach. This underscores that even with significant aid, projects imposed without local input and ownership are unlikely to succeed, highlighting the critical role of internal community resources and validation.

iv) Corridor Economic Empowerment Project (CEEP)/ Economic Empowerment and HIV

vi) Vulnerability Reduction along Transport Corridors in Southern Africa. The project implementation sites are in Eastern and Lusaka provinces. CEEP is premised on the rationale that poverty in informal work settings like transport corridors and other densely populated areas exacerbate HIV and AIDS vulnerability. CEEP is implemented through informal economy structures and has demonstrated how belonging to a group can provide internal resources for beneficiaries, such as business loans from internal savings or collateral for external loans. These groups could also develop their own businesses, leading to larger projects. This illustrates how collective internal resources and group cohesion can be building blocks for economic empowerment.[2]

vii) The Rwandans performance of 'Umuganda' which involves sweeping the streets of Kigali every last Saturday of the month. 'Umuganda' translates from Kinyarwanda as 'coming together in common purpose to achieve an outcome'. This activity has played a significant role in Rwanda's cleanliness and development as well as fostering unity among them.

African communities can leverage their internal resources by focusing on asset-based community development. This means identifying and mobilizing existing strengths, skills, knowledge, social networks, and local institutions rather than solely focusing on aid.

3. Solidarity and Resistance

The term 'decolonizing aid' represents a critical and evolving paradigm shift within the international development sector. It seeks to fundamentally re-evaluate and transform the historical power dynamics and structural inequalities that have long characterized aid relationships where donors have an upper hand over recipients. This perspective argues that aid, since the Second World War, has been designed around political interests, such as post-Cold War alignment rather than solely altruistic development goals.

International aid needs to be rebuilt on principles of solidarity and equality, as part of a

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2   https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/corridor-economic-empowerment-project-ceep-economic empowerment-and-hiv accessed on 29 June, 2025.

wider vision of historical justice and recognition of cultural diversity. This involves moving away from the rigid 'project mode' and bureaucratic imperatives that often characterize traditional aid, fostering instead reciprocal partnerships between international and national actors.

Localization, aimed at placing power and resources into local hands, is a key aspect of this transformation. It seeks to empower local stakeholders; individuals, communities, and governments to set priorities, devise solutions, and mobilize resources for sustainable outcomes, ensuring that development action is locally informed and led.

Ultimately, the future of aid effectiveness in Africa hinges on a fundamental reorientation of power. This necessitates a conscious move away from transactional, top-down models towards truly transformational partnerships that prioritize local agency, respect diverse knowledge systems, and foster self-sustaining development rooted in African priorities and leadership.

3.1. Young African leaders can actively resist the "middleman" culture and support solidarity by:

i) Direct partnerships: Bypassing International Non-Government Organizations (INGO) intermediaries and forming direct partnerships with other African organizations, grassroots movements, and local government bodies. This reduces overheads and ensures more resources reach the intended beneficiaries.

ii) Knowledge sharing platforms: Creating and utilizing platforms for peer-to-peer learning, resource sharing, and collaborative advocacy among African organizations. This builds a collective voice and reduces fragmentation.

iii) Joint advocacy: Coming together to advocate for policy changes at national, regional, and international levels that promote local ownership, equitable partnerships, and decolonized aid practices.

iv) Investing in local capacity: Prioritizing the development of skills, infrastructure, and financial management within African organizations, reducing reliance on external technical assistance.

3.2. To avoid replicating colonial patterns in leadership and work, it's crucial to:

i)   Embrace humility and inclusivity: Leaders must actively listen to and learn from communities, valuing diverse perspectives and ensuring genuine participation in decisionmaking. Avoid top-down, expert-driven approaches.

ii) Deconstruct internal biases: Critically examine one's own assumptions and biases that might stem from colonial education systems or internalized hierarchies.

iii) Promote authentic representation: Ensure that leadership and decision-making bodies genuinely reflect the diversity of African communities.

iv) Focus on process, not just outcomes: Emphasize participatory and empowering processes that build agency and self-reliance, rather than just delivering predetermined outputs.

4. Challenging Internalized Hierarchies

The phrase 'colonizers in black skin' is a profoundly challenging and introspective concept. It suggests that colonialism is not only an external, historical imposition but can also be practiced by Africans. Furthermore, this concept deeply challenges my understanding by revealing that the legacy of colonialism extends far beyond physical occupation or direct political control. It underscores how the very structures, attitudes, and power dynamics of the colonial era can be adopted and reinforced by local actors.

The phrase brings to light how individuals and institutions within African contexts might inadvertently perpetuate hierarchical and extractive systems that mirror those of the past. This means that even local decision-makers might prioritize external models and solutions over indigenous wisdom and locally-rooted approaches. The 'colonizers in black skin' concept suggests that local elites, operating within this vertical structure, can become complicit in perpetuating external agendas. This is particularly evident in instances where elite bargains between donors and authoritarian African governments prioritize easily quantifiable development successes over genuine democratic participation and freedom for their populations, effectively fostering development without democracy.

The phrase emphasizes that genuine decolonization is not a comfortable process. It demands a willingness from those who benefit from existing power structures, even if they are African, to confront this history and potentially relinquish some advantages for the sake of a more just, sustainable, and equitable community.

This critical perspective compels me to recognize that true decolonization requires a profound shift in mindset and power while addressing the root causes of inequality.

4.1. Dynamics showing up in Institutions and among peers

The concept of 'colonizers in black skin' is a powerful and uncomfortable challenge to confront. It highlights the insidious ways in which internalized colonial mentalities and power structures can manifest within African leadership and institutions. This challenges me to recognize that oppression isn't always an external force; it can also be perpetuated by those who share a similar background but have adopted the dynamics of the colonizer. I see these dynamics showing up in various ways:

i)   The practice of decolonization washing is prevalent where organizations express rhetorical commitment to decolonization and localization, but their practices do not fundamentally shift power or resources to local hands. This can be seen when international NGOs, despite calls for localization, continue to manage overall contracting processes and subcontract to national NGOs, maintaining a hierarchical structure where ultimate control remains at the top.

ii) Institutions, often driven by donor requirements and the need for easily auditable results, may prioritize quantifiable development successes over deeper, more holistic, or locally defined progress. This can lead to local teams focusing on metrics that satisfy external funders rather than those that truly reflect community-defined needs and aspirations.

iii) African institutions can sometimes replicate bureaucratic, top-down, and exclusionary practices that mirror colonial administrative structures, rather than fostering inclusive and participatory governance. This can lead to a disconnect between leadership and the communities they serve.

iv) In some instances, African governments, while they formerly colonized, may impose restrictions on civil society organizations, particularly those that advocate for greater accountability or human rights. This can be seen as an internal manifestation of power

dynamics that silence critical voices, mirroring historical patterns of control.

v) Among Peers, sometimes, there's a tendency to seek external validation, seek positions within international structures, or inadvertently replicate hierarchical power dynamics from global north institutions in our own organizations.

5. Action Point

One action I would recommend to be applied in my work place is the aspect of re-learning African history and heritage. Africa has very rich culture that is untold of and unspoken about by many. The moderator, Dr. Olum Lornah Aforyomungu posed questions on how to reclaim agency and the position of women in African culture within this decolonization context during the 'Reclaiming the Frame' webinar, however, some of these questions can only be answered through the full appreciation of African history. Thus in the work space, books regarding African culture and heritage could be read and shared during the book hurdle sessions.

Furthermore, facilitators could be brought to talk about the rich African history which entails; culture, African modes of development and women's contribution during this development. This will empower members of the organization to become more informed about Africa and harness a better fight towards decolonization of Africa. This can also be extended to the community by organizing equip circles to sensitize young women on the contribution of women in the plight for decolonization of Africa. This process of reclaiming narratives helps maintain the unique identities of Africa but also fosters continuity and resilience against colonialism and neo-colonialism. Below are some of the benefits of this;

- Reclaiming and celebrating pre-colonial African achievements, diverse traditions, and rich histories helps to dismantle these misrepresenting narratives and restore a sense of pride, identity, and self-worth among African people. It asserts that Africa has always had valid forms of civilization and knowledge systems.

- For a long time, the study of African history and culture was dominated by Eurocentric perspectives, leading to skewed interpretations and the perpetuation of stereotypes. Decolonization requires challenging these dominant Western frameworks and affirming African perspectives.

- It is prudent to note that African societies possess vast indigenous knowledge systems in areas like medicine, agriculture, conflict resolution, and governance. Decolonization

involves recognizing, valuing, and integrating these systems into modern education, development, and governance structures, rather than solely relying on Western models. More so, colonialism often suppressed traditional African cultural practices, languages, and religious beliefs. Decolonization thus involves actively preserving, revitalizing, and promoting these elements, ensuring continuity between past, present, and future generations.