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Humanitarian Leader

Reflexivity, coloniality and Do No Harm: thoughts on the subjectivity of aid workers

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Abstract

This working paper is a reflection on how fostering the practices of individual and institutional positionality and reflexivity could improve the effectiveness of the Do No Harm approach, and act as a trigger for a reflection on the coloniality embedded in aid work. More specifically, it looks at the impact that the recognition of aid workers' subjectivity is having on the application of the Do No Harm approach and how this could lead to deeper questioning of colonial practices, dynamics, and principles. In the first part I introduce the concepts of positionality, reflexivity and coloniality, and I clarify my standpoint. I then recall the story of Do No Harm, dig through its various interpretations, and identify the main streams, pausing on the intersection between the present reflection on aid workers' subjectivity and the use of the Do No Harm approach. In the following section I explore positionality and reflexivity as tools that can help to challenge some of the colonial assumptions which are at the foundation of our sector, giving an example through the analysis of the principle of neutrality. Finally, I give suggestions for the application of positionality and reflexivity in humanitarian and development settings.

Leadership relevance

This paper is directly addressing humanitarian leaders in three ways. Firstly, it introduces practices of positionality and reflexivity as relevant tools for leadership in the sector. Secondly, it proposes a connection between the recognition of the subjectivity of aid workers and the practice of Do No Harm. Finally, it wishes to contribute to the current debate on coloniality in the sector by giving practical examples and suggestion. Through this paper, humanitarian leaders will have the possibility to refresh concepts that are essential to navigate the changes sweeping the sector, and to question their own leadership practices through an analysis of power dynamics.

Yo soy un hombre común. De la misma forma pienso que, en realidad, los individuos, por muy peculiares que sean, nunca son algo especial o excepcional, puesto que, básicamente, son sólo eso: personas.

(...) Hablo de los demás a través de mí. Mis autorretratos no son una reafirmación de mi personalidad, no son el reflejo de un sujeto de características narcisista. Son sólo un pretexto para hablar de los otros, de esos seres, comunes y corrientes, de los cuales yo me siento paradigma.[1] —Peña González, 1996

Positionality, reflexivity and the colonial matrix of power

I am a humanitarian and development worker. I identify as a queer woman, and a migrant. I grew up in one of the 'underdeveloped' and stigmatised areas of my country, Italy. I became a humanitarian and development worker after a youth spent as an activist and campaigner for social justice. When people ask me how and why I decided on such a change, I reply that it was obvious for me, as I have always been interested in how power is shared in the world, in how this share is often unfair, and in how I can contribute to a positive change. It is exactly for this reason that I have always been willing to understand how humanitarian and development actions could contribute to reinforcing or changing power dynamics.

I am also convinced that there are many more similarities among human beings than differences (Peña González, 1996), even though the individualistic system of values I grew up in taught me the opposite. For this reason, I share my reflections and thoughts: not because I consider them unique, but rather because I think they could belong to many others.

My early years as a humanitarian taught me that humanitarian assistance and development cooperation (in this paper I'll use the umbrella term 'aid sector') can harm populations, increase conflicts and inequality, and contribute to consolidating, rather than eradicating, uneven power structures and coloniality. I use the word "coloniality"—short for Colonial Matrix of Power—borrowing it from the Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano (2000) and by many after him. According to this framework, during the colonial time, occupiers imposed not only their rules on the occupied, but their social norms and structures, and their ways of categorising knowledge, the human being, and the world. They brought and imposed their ways of seeing and living in the world, often trying to violently cancel every possible alternative.

[1] I am a common man. And I think that, in reality, individuals are never something special or exceptional, regardless of how peculiar they are, because basically this is what they are: people. (...) I speak about others through myself. My self-portraits are not a reaffirmation of my personality, they are not the mirror of a narcissistic subject. They are simply a pretext to speak about the others, about these other beings, common and ordinaries, whom I feel a sample of. (Author's translation)

With the struggle for freedom and decolonisation, most of the land was liberated, but that way of seeing the world and living in it persisted. This is coloniality, and we witness it every day in our private and public life.

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The aid sector is steeped in coloniality. It was born on the ruins of colonialism, and many have said it is a form of neo-colonialism (Nkrumah, 1965; Ingiyimbere, 2017).

Because I wanted to find tools that could trigger different dynamics and challenge the coloniality of the sector, I turned to the Do No Harm approach, which became a pillar of my practice as a researcher, a practitioner, a leader, and a mentor. I was and I am convinced that the Do No Harm approach, if correctly put in practice, can act as a mitigating factor for coloniality and even lead to interesting exercises of decoloniality.

But to do so, it needs to include practices of individual and institutional positionality and reflexivity.

The concepts of positionality and reflexivity are widely adopted by feminist, critical and decolonial scholarship, but they are virtually absent in humanitarian practices.

Positionality "(...) refers to where one is located in relation to their various social identities (gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, geographical location etc.); the combination of these identities and their intersections shape how we understand and engage with the world" (Queens University, 2024). Positionality stems from the acknowledgement of intersectionality. Our complex identities and the power and disadvantage that derive from them place us in a specific location in the world, and it is from this location that we observe and act. Positionality is complex and we don't have complete control of it.

Not all our identities are visible to others. In my case for example, I could identify as a person who experienced oppression and stigmatisation because of her belonging to a subaltern culture in her country, and for this reason I could feel entitled to some 'closeness' with some of the participants of the projects I coordinate. However, while facilitating the delivery of non-food items in the country where I currently live and work, Cuba, I would be perceived as an external and distant being, a white woman, holding a privileged passport and the power of deciding who will receive aid, and who won't.

Positionality, therefore, is not simply and conveniently the way one positions oneself. Nor can it be limited to the oversimplified binary insider/outsider traditionally used by many INGOs when looking at the different access that national and international staff can have during operations. Positionality has a lot to do with the way one is positioned by others. Some identify at least three kinds of positionality: "ascribed positionality (as is generally the case with gender); selective positionality (as in the case of those who opt for a particular position) and enforced positionality (where others forcibly define the position whether it meets with subjective criteria or not)" (Franks, 2002, p.43). It also needs to be mentioned that positionality changes according to the context.

Reflexivity is what one does with one's own positionality. It is the process of awareness that we undergo while trying to understand how our positionality impacts our actions and the context we are in. Through reflexivity, we unpack and understand the effects of our positionality on what we are doing as humanitarians. Some scholarship considers positionality and reflexivity as synonymous (Massoud, 2022), but I believe that the distinction of the two concepts makes their practice easier for aid workers.

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Do no harm, from medicine to aid

In book one of *Epidemics*, written about 400 years B.C., Hippocrates—considered the father of medicine in the Global North[2] —says: "make a habit of two things: to help, or at least to Do No Harm".

This mention of the "Do No Harm" approach is traditionally considered the first in Western history. Nowadays the Do No Harm approach is widely used in transnational contexts, including in the aid sector.

But it has not always been like this.

From the end of the Second World War, the creation of the United Nations (UN) and the setup of the system of international aid[3], whole generations of humanitarian and development workers grew up full of good intentions and internationalism, but with little awareness of their impact. They thought it was enough to aim for 'The Good', in order to produce what was good in reality. Those generations were often unconsciously upholding the all-Eurocentric and colonial idea that concepts such as 'development' are universally true, and that there is only one way to get to such development—the way undertaken by countries of the Global North. They thought they had the (often white) burden of saving those who lived in 'underdeveloped' countries by bringing them what they perceived as 'progress'. Such progress was embodied by societal and economic models located in Western Europe and North America[4].

There is one unspoken yet central assumption at the foundation of the way of living and acting in the aid sector—this belief that there is only one universal knowledge—the one produced in the Global North.

There is one unspoken yet central assumption at the foundation of the way of living and acting in the aid sector—this belief that there is only one universal knowledge—the one produced in the Global North. According to this narrative, people in the Global North are the natural holders of such knowledge. Through international aid they can share what belongs to them and is absent in countries of the Global South.[5] As knowledge is universal, the concrete condition of the body that hosts the brain producing ideas such as 'development' does not matter.

This belief meant generations of aid workers believed that while providing humanitarian assistance or fostering development projects they could consider themselves external to the context, and their presence uninfluential. Such an assumption is implicitly embedded in one of the principles that is at the core of the Western humanitarian narrative: the principle of neutrality.

But all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1989). What we are, and the relation we have with the environment, has an influence on what we think, on how we share it, and on how the world around us perceives it. Delivering aid without taking into consideration the power deriving from our identities can negatively affect aid practices, as one runs the risk of confusing the effort of practicing neutrality with the alleged innate quality of being neutral.

These considerations, and reports of how aid had been instrumentalised and manipulated by actors in context, led to the creation of the Local Capacities for Peace Process. Hosted by the Collaborative for Development Action, the project was created "(...) to learn how aid and

[2] I am conscious of the many limitations of the binary 'Global North/Global South'. However, I will use them for readability purposes. With Global North I refer to those countries traditionally delivering aid, and with Global South I refer to those countries traditionally receiving aid.
[3] Others date the creation of the international humanitarian system to the end of WWI and the treaty of Versailles (Davey et al, 2013).
[4] The history of international aid begins after the Second World War; when the world was divided in two by the Iron Curtain, and the model exported was mainly the Western one.
[5] This has been defined by many as the 'white man's burden'.

conflict interact in order to help aid workers find a way to address human needs in conflict situations without feeding conflict" (Wallace, 2002, p. 480). It started in 1994, funded by donors and implementing agencies, and consisted of four phases: analysis of case studies (1994 – 1996), feedback workshops (1996 – 1998), implementation (1998 – 2000) and mainstreaming (2001). The process was documented through a series of booklets written by Mary B. Anderson from 1996 onwards and gave life to an evolving tool called the "Do No Harm Framework". Agencies working in aid have since incorporated this framework at different levels. Today, Do No Harm is mentioned by UNHCR as one of its core principles, while the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IFRC) published a manual named *Operationalizing better program initiatives—Do No Harm* in 2016.

Current uses of Do No Harm

The *Do No Harm Handbook* is a practical and readable product available online at no cost, which introduces the Do No Harm approach through seven steps. Its structure, and the examples that are given through the handbook, show how those who worked on it tried to examine, as exhaustively as possible and from a Do No Harm perspective, all aspects and phases of aid: from relationships, to context, to the nature of the programs and the interactions. The methodology proposed digs into factors that might not be evident at a first glance, such as choices related to human resources, or implementation modalities. At the same time, authors acknowledge that this tool is evolving according to a context which is changing fast.

In the past 20 years agencies involved in aid have adapted the framework, and today its application could be summarised into two streams:

The first stream mainly concerns donors, which are increasingly using Do No Harm as a mechanism to hold their grantees accountable: aid should not harm communities, not only direct project participants, but the land and environment they inhabit. For the scope of this article, it is worth noticing that the beneficiary of such accountability is not the community that participates in the project, but the donor itself—or, in case of public donors, taxpayers. Grantees should not do harm, first and foremost because this is against the donor's policies.

Some organisations, for example, USAID, have made it compulsory for staff working in certain sectors to support LGBTIQ+ communities and actions, while others, like the European Commission, also apply Do No Harm frameworks to their environmental commitments. Donors are also including the Do No Harm principle in their conflict analysis requests, asking organisations that are willing to implement projects to analyse how the planned action might interact with social, political, economic, and environmental factors, and trigger potential unintended harm. They also expect the creation of mitigation mechanisms and measures to offset these factors.

This approach has considerable advantages, including the fact that donors require clear indicators measuring the capacity to avoid doing harm. However, simply focusing on existing rules and procedures, rather than on the value of each individual, presents a big risk—the perpetuation of paternalistic beliefs and behaviours through the project cycle.

The second stream of Do No Harm implementation is mainly linked to practitioners, who are looking at Do No Harm from an ethics perspective. This stream includes both reflections on safeguarding and protecting project participants from sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse (PSHEA), and efforts to look at how aid changes power relations within communities and therefore might trigger new conflicts if not provided in the correct way.

This interpretation of Do No Harm gained strength after 2016, when an enormous scandal involving several INGOs and UN agencies, shed light on widespread practices of sexual abuse and exploitation from NGO and UN staff among project participants. This event focused more attention on the power dynamics triggered by aid programs at an individual level, and many organisations put in place measures such as compulsory training sessions for all staff and feedback and complaint mechanisms for project participants.

Positionality, reflexivity and Do No Harm: opportunities

> I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partially and not universally is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity (Haraway, 1989, p.589).

A third stream is emerging with relation to Do No Harm and it intersects with the first two. A growing number of practitioners and scholars see in the Do No Harm approach something more than just the mere analysis of conflict sensitivities, or the tools that agencies demand for accountability purposes. Instead, they see this approach as a lived, guiding principle for each professional, even before the organisation of operations begins. The original question that triggered the work of the Local Capacities for Peace Process: "how can one provide aid in the context of conflict without exacerbating the conflict?" (Wallace, 2002, p. 480), gains new strength and nuance, and embraces a reflection on the subjectivity of aid workers. The question then becomes: how can aid workers do their job, taking into consideration the weight of their

subjectivity in relation to team members, communities and project participants?

Before moving forward and proposing a way to address this question, I feel the need to clarify my purpose and point of view. When addressing topics related to ethics and to identity, one inevitably runs the risk of falling into prescriptive conclusions, such as saying that certain subjectivities are, or are not, adequate to work in the sector. This is not the aim of this working paper. I am not interested in dichotomies, or binary categories (Vitantonio, 2021), as I consider that they are only useful when one needs to simplify and reduce reality in order to apply the law, or begin a medical treatment. I feel that using binary categories to understand our reality is part of our colonial heritage. It is the development of the colonisers' point of view. Considering themselves the centre of the world and ignoring that their position was just one among many, colonisers identified themselves as the only legitimate beings on this earth. They were the 'subject', while the rest were identified as the 'other', something they could dispose of, for their wealth and pleasure. They therefore categorised the world through this fictitious juxtaposition between concepts, qualities and beings that are deeply interconnected, such as good/evil, rational/primitive, male/female, humanity/nature.

The question then becomes: how can aid workers do their job, taking into consideration the weight of their subjectivity in relation to team members, communities and project participants?

Reality is to me much more diverse, complex and intricate than these dichotomies. That is why I don't want to propose a new division between 'good' aid workers and 'bad' aid workers in this paper. Rather, I am interested in a process that unveils and embraces such complexity, with the purpose of contributing to collective reflection and understanding. I believe that, by recognising our subjectivities and the impact that they have on our work, we could learn something new about our profession and how to do it in a respectful way. The aim of the practices I am now going to propose is not about creating aid workers that are perfect. The aim is to be transparent about our humanity and imperfections, and use this transparency to create bridges.

We can now return to the question. How can practitioners reflect on their subjectivity, and on its impact on their work and actions? A powerful yet simple tool is provided by practices of reflexivity. Exercises of reflexivity are usually composed of two parts. In the first one, each participant takes the time, individually and within teams, to identify, unpack, and bring to the surface their positionality in the context of work. This is a first, important step, that helps each aid worker to gain awareness of the fact that they are not invisible. However, limiting ourselves to recognising positionality inevitably invokes some form of essentialism.

For this reason, exercises of reflexivity should include a second phase. Once people have clarity on their own positionality, participants should look at how it interacts with the context and the program one is going to implement. To paraphrase Donna Haraway (1989), performing this kind of exercise means acknowledging one's point of view and how this influences the action one is going to take.

Exercises of reflexivity are becoming increasingly popular in the academia (Harrington, 2022), and positionality statements are often included among good practices recommended to teachers and professors. Simple research through search engines and academic libraries[6] brings to the surface the existence of numerous articles, essays and papers focused on the need to introduce these kinds of reflections in development and humanitarian actions in order to unveil and better understand power dynamics.

However, references to positionality and reflexivity are virtually absent from documents available online produced by actors working in the sector, and are not a common praxis in this working environment. This does not mean that the sector persists in the naïve belief that all workers carry the same power and have the same access. It appears however, that when differences, privileges and vulnerabilities of aid workers are acknowledged, they are usually simplified and reduced to the North/South dichotomy and increasingly, within the growing debate on decolonising aid, to National versus International staff, insider versus outsider.

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These simplifications risk ignoring at least two elements. The first is that aid workers are, as are all other human beings, subjects of intersectional factors that cannot be reduced to their passports. The second is the colonial matrix of power, which pervades the sector and the contexts where aid is provided. Colonial patterns permeate societies beyond geographic divisions, and are sometimes so embedded in habits, processes, education and culture that only in-depth analysis can unveil them. Even when they are unveiled, these mechanisms cannot easily be destroyed, as they are part of our way of being

[6] For this purpose, I used the library of the European University Institute.

in the world. In other words, the conscious subaltern experience of coloniality is not a spontaneous event that happens simply because one is born within a subaltern culture. It is something that needs to be awakened and ignited through a process (Mignolo, 2000), something that an increasing number of practitioners, activists and scholars call "decolonising the mind" (Van Dyke, in Vitantonio, 2024). A simple and clear analogy can be drawn from feminism. Experience has taught us that it is not enough to be a biological female in order to be a feminist and to stand for gender justice—a clear example of this is the increasing number of female leaders that promote policies against women's rights.[7]

Reflexivity as an exercise of decoloniality

In this paper, I am suggesting that looking at aid workers and at their subjectivity could be an important ingredient in the application of the Do No Harm approach, and I am proposing reflexivity as a useful and accessible tool for such a purpose.

But I am also suggesting that exercises of reflexivity hold a disruptive power. If we start to admit that our position in the world changes the way we can provide aid, we are implicitly challenging one of the pillars of humanitarianism as it is conceived by the mainstream, colonial narrative of the Global North, that is, the principle of neutrality. Stating that humanitarian assistance is neutral entails the assumption that we, humanitarian workers, can extract ourselves from the context, that we look at the world on fire from somewhere above. This embodies the Eurocentric and colonial belief that 'we' don't belong here, that we belong somewhere 'better', and this somewhere 'better' is far from the conflict, the disaster, the humanitarian crisis we are trying to address. It is the place from where 'we' (according to this narrative) exercise legitimate control, and the place we depart from to make an allegedly 'better' world. But really, as soon as we step into the context, we are the context, we have an impact on the context, and we change the context. Our actions don't occur in a vacuum, they interact with the lives of other humans that have thoughts, beliefs, and agency.

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[7] See, for example, the election of Giorgia Meloni in Italy: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/giorgia-meloni-far-right-brothers-of-italy-election-prime-minister-racism-gender/

Including exercises of reflexivity in our Do No Harm practices is certainly not the final solution to the coloniality of the sector, but it does bring about some important outputs. Firstly, as explained above, it challenges the colonial narrative at the foundation of the sector. It does so by problematising the beliefs and practices of too many aid professionals and agencies, who still naively approach our work with the conviction of being neutral. Secondly, it helps us recognise that the people in front of us are not passive objects of assistance. We are all of us subjects with our own fears and hopes.

If it is true that a decolonial turn in aid is only possible by decolonising the minds of aid workers, this is certainly a meaningful step in that direction.

Exercises of reflexivity should take into consideration all factors that might have an impact on power dynamics, including gender, ability, age, religion, ethnicity, and class. But they should also dwell on identities from the perspective of the colonial matrix of power. Useful questions to ask ourselves (and this is a non-exhaustive list) are: where does my knowledge come from? Which models of leadership am I following? Where does my formal education derive from and how much of this education is working in an unconscious/automatic manner to shape my actions and points of view? Do any of my identities give me power over others through the legacy of colonial practices?

Leaders in the aid sector can approach reflexivity from at least three perspectives, and one does not exclude the other. Firstly, they can practice reflexivity as a tool that can improve their self-awareness: this can help their understanding of power dynamics, their reading of complex situations, and the prevention of actions that can cause harm to other workers and project participants. It can also support their research of decolonial and non-patriarchal models of leadership. Secondly, exercises of reflexivity can be proposed to team members as an individual practice—something that can improve their self-awareness and their reading of the space they move in. Thirdly, reflexivity can become a common practice within teams for the purpose of building trust and cohesion. In this case, it should be accompanied by moments of collective reflection, and occur in its own safe space, separate from the space for performance appraisal, so that team members feel that this practice is not impacting their performance. Team members should also know that they are free to share only what they are comfortable with: that working on positionality unveils our vulnerability.

Positionality is not something set in stone or decided at birth: it changes according to the context where we live and act. For this reason, reflexivity is an exercise that should be practiced regularly and frequently—at least at the beginning of every project or when a team undergoes changes.

Conclusions

This working paper is the result of my personal research and practice. I believe that the aid sector can still play a role in making this world a better place, but I also think that we, humanitarian professionals, need to systematically promote a change through our daily practices and behaviours if we want to live up to the values that we theoretically uphold and not to be the perpetrators of an unjust system that replicates oppressive and colonial patterns.

The aid sector can still play a role in making this world a better place, but I also think that we, humanitarian professionals, need to systematically promote a change through our daily practices and behaviours if we want to live up to the values that we theoretically uphold and not to be the perpetrators of an unjust system that replicates oppressive and colonial patterns.

One of the practices I propose links the Do No Harm approach to exercises of positionality and reflexivity. I consider that in practicing these exercises, we could not only introduce in our work some important reflection on power relations, but also bring to the surface the coloniality that is at the foundation of our sector.

I also acknowledge that awareness is not enough to achieve change, but believe that it is an essential trigger. Practicing reflexivity will allow us to act with different awareness and different expectations. It will allow us to recognise the many intersectional factors that determine the power and disadvantage of each of the actors who play a role in our projects and programs. Moreover, it will also ignite a process of critical analysis of some of the core principles that inform and shape our system.

By learning from feminist and decolonial scholars who moved away from the presumption of objectivity by embracing the reality of different and unique points of view, we can step away from the naïve assumption that everybody is equal, simply because it is not so. On the contrary, everyone is different, and accepting the possibility of these differences co-existing is part of the decolonial turn of the sector. Only by identifying and recognising these differences can we manage to promote a sector based on respect and justice, and perhaps, shake off some of the coloniality which permeates it.

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