

Unpacking Power Dynamics in International Development: A Causal Layered Analysis

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the international development sector has increasingly shifted toward locally-led models of development. Recognizing the need to include local populations in the design, implementation, and leadership of projects, practices such as localization, participatory development, and community-led development have become established in most international non-governmental organizations. However, despite extensive methodologies, institutional support, policy frameworks, and advocacy around shifting power from global to local actors, development relationships continue to be largely dominated by donor-led priorities.

Responding to these long-standing critiques on embedded inequality as well as more recent calls to dismantle systemic racism spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement, the sector has been embarking on a process to 'decolonize development'. This involves acknowledging the sector's colonial history and resulting Western-dominated, white-centered structures that perpetuate unequal power dynamics. Although these practices signal progress, there lacks a clearly defined framework for envisioning an alternative development paradigm.

Employing a futures research framework (Causal Layered Analysis), this paper unpacks the underlying systems, worldviews, and narratives that give rise to current unequal power dynamics in international development. The paper also articulates an alternative metaphor to create the conditions for a new paradigm to emerge. Through a comprehensive literature review and several interviews with senior leaders of international development organizations, the research revealed a machine metaphor as driving the beliefs, systems, and activities within the current development paradigm. By adopting instead an ecosystem metaphor, the paper outlines alternate ways of thinking, working and relating that support a regenerative development paradigm - one that allows for mutually beneficial relationships.

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Glossary of Terms

Community-led development: An approach to international development in which all stakeholders work together to create and achieve locally owned visions and goals. It is based on a set of core principles that set vision and priorities by local people, put local voices in the lead, build on local strengths, collaborate across sectors, and focus on systemic change rather than short-term projects.

Causal layered analysis: A futures research technique pioneered by Sohail Inayatullah used to understand the systemic causes of current problems, and create alternative narratives that support a new future. Causal layered analysis consists of four levels: the litany, social causes, worldview and myth/metaphor.

Decolonization: The process of unpacking existing structures that perpetuate colonial power dynamics and are maintained through centering and prioritizing the experiences of privileged Western thought and approaches. It also involves valuing and revitalizing local and indigenous knowledge and approaches to create inclusive, respectful spaces and relationships.

Humanitarian aid: Assistance designed to address short-term, life-saving initiatives in the immediate aftermath of emergencies. For example, when an agency responds to an earthquake strike by providing food, water, temporary shelter, and health services.

International development: Long-term initiatives that respond to ongoing structural issues, inequality, and systemic poverty by improving the health, nutrition, education, economic opportunities, and overall well being of communities.

Localization: A process where international actors shift funding, power and responsibilities of development and humanitarian aid efforts toward local and national actors. It ensures flexible and predictable funding is directly oriented towards local actors, and program design is collaborative and focused on strengthening national capacity.

Regenerative development: A framework that embodies principles found in living systems and generates continuous whole-system health, wellbeing and resilience. It is based on a holistic worldview that recognizes systems as interconnected networks.

Sustainability: The capacity to meet current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It focuses on minimizing damage to the environment and human health and using resources more efficiently.

Introduction

Context

“The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges.”

- Audre Lorde, 1984

The effectiveness of foreign aid and development has been a contentious issue for decades (Bado, 2012; Mahembe and Obhiambo, 2019). While significant efforts and investments have been made by national governments, non-government organizations (NGOs) and international donors, and notable progress has been achieved, results to reduce inequality and alleviate poverty globally have been largely insignificant (Easterly, 2016; Bado, 2012). William Easterly (2016) attests that this is in-part due to the prevalence of top-down, technocratic approaches to local problems. Straightforward, technical solutions can be seductive to rely on, yet ignoring the political, cultural, and social contexts in which problems occur can cause adverse effects (ibid). Impact and progress can only be ensured if the complex realities of communities are integrated into development work (Easterly, 2006; Loha, 2018).

Over the past decade, international development organizations have increasingly recognized this need to include local communities in the design, implementation, and leadership of development projects. For initiatives to succeed and be sustained over the long-term, inclusive and diverse representation of community members is vital from the beginning. Practices like participatory development, community-led development, and localization are integral to upholding the principles and values of organizations that promote equity, inclusion, and self-sufficiency.

Localization has been considered an essential next step for systemic change in international development and humanitarian aid. Localization is defined as a “transformational process to recognize, respect, and invest in local and national humanitarian and leadership capacities” (Oxfam, 2018). It ensures flexible and predictable funding is directly oriented towards local actors, and program design is collaborative and focused on strengthening national capacity. Outlined in the Grand Bargain of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, localization was considered to bring not only “short-term efficiency gains but also promote local ownership, strengthen local civil society more generally, and increase that society’s capacity to manage future shocks” (HLP Report, 2016).

Despite robust institutional support and policy frameworks, localization as a process of shifting power dynamics from global to local actors and partners remains largely elusive (Novovic, 2020). Localization has different interpretations, and there are tensions about who defines the terms and conditions of localization (Sánchez, 2020). As a result, greater flow of financing direct to local organizations and a power transition away from international bodies is not always being felt on the ground (Green, 2018). As Degan Ali, Executive Director of Adeso argues, localization is “a lot of rhetoric — a lot of nice aspirational language, but no real action and substantive systems change” (Cornish, 2020). This inertia

could be due to several barriers to embracing localization, including the perceived risks to reputation and legal problems that funders try to avoid, and the significant administration associated with fiduciary reporting requirements, which complicates partnerships (Gillespie et. al., 2020).

Although development practices like localization and community-led development signal a shift in a productive direction (away from relying on technocratic, top-down solutions), the underlying systems in which they operate ultimately inhibit their impacts. It has been recognized that the sector's colonial legacy and resulting unequal power dynamics between donors, international NGOs (INGOs) and local organizations and communities are part of the deeper-rooted system that limits progress towards locally-led projects (Kékéli, 2020; Kimou, 2020; Pailey, 2020; Rivas, 2020). It's like trying to replace a dying crop with a new one - if the soil in which the crop grows is unhealthy, the replacement faces the same fate. Similarly, changing development practices and methodologies without examining the deeper systems and beliefs in which they emerged will not create any real, lasting change.

Calls to engage with this unrooting process through decolonizing development have grown in strength and frequency particularly over the past year, as the Black Lives Matter movement urges all sectors to uncover and challenge systemic racism within their institutions, organizations, and relationships (Loha, 2018; Pinet and Leon-Himmelstine, 2020). Decolonization is a process of unpacking colonial power structures that are maintained through centering and prioritizing the experiences of privileged actors in global development efforts (Kalema, 2019). While the field of international development has seen sustained efforts towards decolonization for several years, hegemonic notions of development continue to dominate (Sultana, 2019). This process requires systemic change, understanding how the current development landscape is shaped not only by underlying power dynamics, but also the deeper beliefs and worldviews that caused the conditions for colonial power structures to rise.

Decolonizing development also involves defining a new paradigm for equitable relationships that decolonization will ultimately lead to. In this paper, I refer to regenerative development as a set of principles to ground this new paradigm. Regenerative development is a framework for embodying principles found in living systems, and can be applied to the design and transformation of built and natural environments, products, communities, organizations, policies, and processes. The goal of regenerative development is to be in alignment with the way of natural ecosystems instead of operating as if we are parts of a machine (Mang and Haggard, 2016; Capra and Luisi, 2014; Wahl, 2016). The result is co-evolution: evolving in a way that generates mutual benefits and greater overall expression of life and resilience (Mang and Reed, 2012).

Regenerative development begins with restoring the relationship between humans and nature by recognizing our inherent interconnectedness. Instead of seeing nature as separate from us and therefore a resource to exploit, regenerative principles are based on the knowledge that humans *are* nature. This unification of the human community with the natural world is foundational to indigenous worldviews (Royal, 2002).

Regenerative principles of interconnectedness, co-evolution, and mutualism (along with others described in the following sections) are not just applicable to the relationship between humans and nature, but can also be applied to social systems and relationships between groups of people. In this paper, I explore how a regenerative approach to balancing relationships can be applied within international development. The relationships examined in this paper are between donors and INGOs on the one side, and local communities on the other. Employing a futures tool called Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), I will examine the systemic causes of current development relationships, and outline the possibility for regenerative development principles to create the conditions for a new, equitable paradigm in the future.

Research Process and Methodology

Overview

This research seeks to explore the question: **could regenerative development advance decolonization of international development?**

In this paper, I define decolonization in the context of international development as having two main goals: the first is to unpack existing structures that perpetuate colonial power dynamics. This involves acknowledging the sector's roots in colonialism, understanding how colonial power dynamics continue to endure, and challenging those structures to allow for a new paradigm to emerge. As Tavernaro-Haidarian (2019) writes, "decolonization efforts are often framed as strategies that 'de-link', 'dismantle', 'reject', 'contest' or 'struggle against' existing norms" (p.24). In this way, he argues "decolonization often becomes a 'reaction' rather than a 'response to' or a 'way forward' from neoliberal/colonial norms" (ibid). He goes on to reframe decolonization as a "process of creating something new rather than fighting the old, something that exceeds the limits of what we have inherited without destroying it" (ibid: 26). Following his approach, the second goal of decolonizing development in this paper is to create new structures to allow for equitable relationships to prosper. This involves defining equity in development relationships, designing structures that shift power from global to local actors, and changing mindsets to ensure sustainable change.

To undertake these two aims of decolonization, I used Inayatullah's (1998) Causal Layered Analysis framework as a tool to guide my research and examine underlying causes of the current and future development paradigms. CLA is a futures research theory and method used to critically examine the systems, worldviews, and metaphors that brought about a current reality, and offers a framework for realizing alternative futures. CLA is based on the assumption that the way a problem is framed changes the solutions and the actors responsible for creating transformation (Inayatulla, 1998). As Inayatulla describes, the CLA's utility "is not in predicting the future but in creating transformative spaces for the creation of alternative futures" (ibid: 815).

CLA unpacks systems on four levels. Similar to an iceberg floating in the ocean, the problems and conditions we experience on a surface-level represent a small fraction of what's really going on

underneath. There are powerful forces at play below the surface that are often hidden, but that give rise to observable patterns and events (Meadows, 2008). This model helps us understand situations within the context of whole systems, instead of being limited to single, seemingly independent events.

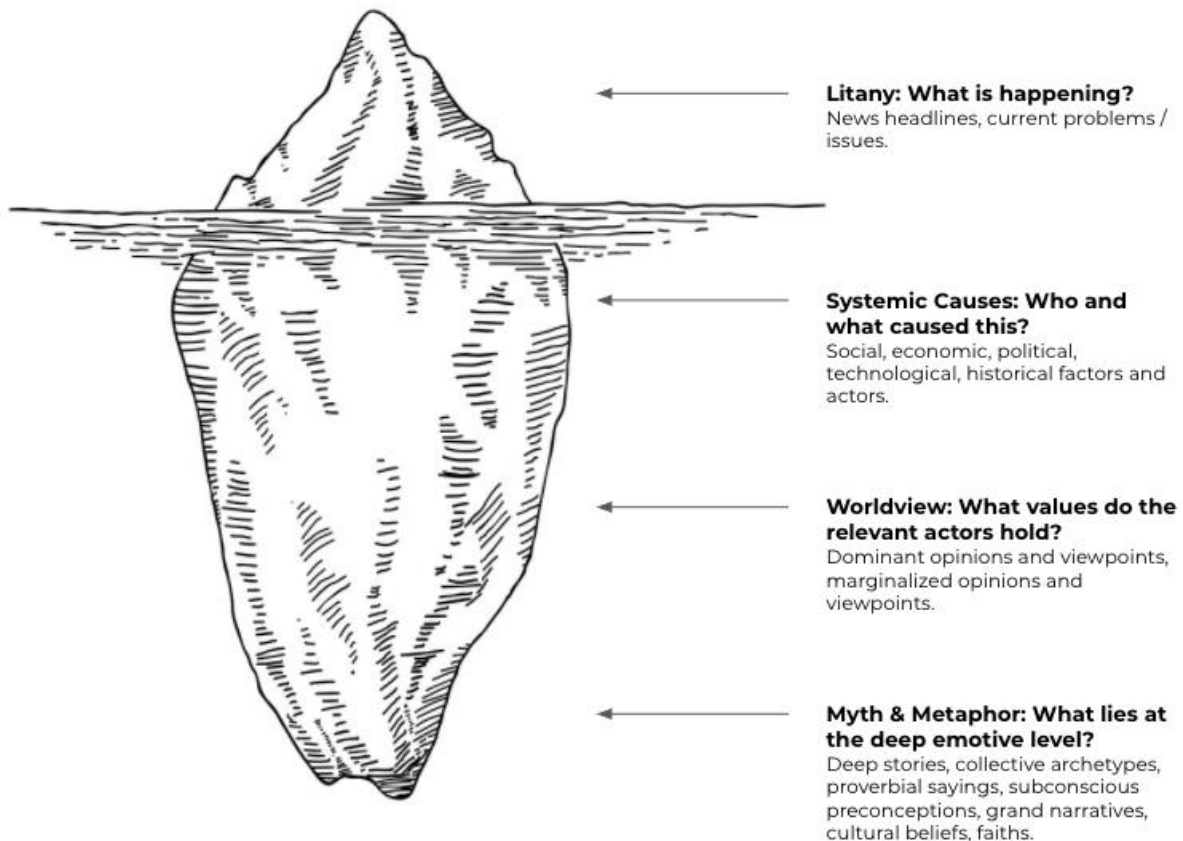


Figure 1: Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 1998)

In the first stage of my research, I examined current relationship dynamics in the international development sector. I focused specifically on large Canadian INGOs bringing in over \$30 million in revenue per year, and also chose not to focus on the humanitarian aid sector, foundations, advocacy organizations, or local grassroots organizations. I made the choice to focus specifically on international development versus humanitarian aid because I noticed a gap in the research, with many scholars examining and critiquing relationship dynamics in humanitarian aid (particularly as it relates to localization initiatives), with less of a focus on the international development sector. Humanitarian aid is designed to address short-term, life-saving initiatives in the immediate aftermath of emergencies, whereas international development responds to ongoing structural issues and systemic poverty, focusing on economic, social and political development. I chose to highlight large INGOs versus smaller local, grassroots, and advocacy organizations because larger institutions often hold greater disparity in power dynamics and their embedded bureaucracy invites the potential for disruption.

In the next stage of research, I examined what structures, worldviews, and narratives might be causing these power dynamics to endure. Next, I analyzed regenerative development approaches and principles, and ideated how they could advance decolonization and balance relationships in international development. Finally, I analyzed the data and integrated insights into the Causal Layered Analysis framework, showing both the current and future paradigms based on my research.

Literature Review

To begin the literature review, I researched recent trends in international development including participatory development, community-led development and localization. I wanted to know how these practices were being used, the benefits of employing them, and barriers to their successful implementation and sustained impact. Second, I researched critiques on development practices from a postcolonial perspective to understand both the history of international development and the sector's efforts to decolonize power relationships. This led me to examine the development funding system and how unequal power dynamics emerge and are perpetuated throughout. To ground this research, I studied several systems thinking tools from Donella Meadows (Thinking in Systems), Dr. C. Otto Scharmer (Theory U), and Sohail Inayatullah (CLA).

I also reviewed regenerative development literature from some of the leading scholars in the field, including Pamela Mang and Ben Haggard (Regenerative Design and Development), Daniel Christian Wahl (Designing Regenerative Cultures), Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi (The Systems View of Life), Carol Stanford (The Regenerative Life; The Regenerative Business), and John Fullerton (Regenerative Economies). I wanted to understand the foundational characteristics of regenerative development, and how the approach could be applied to the process of decolonizing development.

Interviews

To dive deeper into the power dynamics within international development and their systemic causes, I conducted six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with leaders in some of the largest international development organizations in the world (see interview guide in Appendix A). These leaders included a Social Accountability Advisor, Executive Advisor, Director of Global Partnerships, Chief Program Officer, Country Director, and Executive Vice President. I have kept their names and the names of their organizations confidential to protect their privacy. I had two main selection criteria for the interviews: 1) I chose practitioners from large INGOs to be consistent with the scope of my literature review; and 2) I focused on senior leaders who had insight into the strategic vision of their organizations.

In the second round of interviews I met with four experts in regenerative development who are actively applying regenerative practices in their work and with clients. Through these expert interviews I gained a deeper understanding of the core qualities of regenerative development, the benefits of applying regenerative principles to relationships, and the barriers to undertaking the approach.

Analysis and Synthesis

Bringing together the literature and interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis to uncover themes and patterns from the initial research (see data synthesis in Appendix B). This led me to map the relationships between donors, INGOs, and local communities in an influence diagram to help understand and visualize current power dynamics (see Figure 5). To uncover deep-rooted causes of power dynamics in the development sector I synthesized data using the Causal Layered Analysis framework. This framework was chosen to:

- 1) Map the present paradigm
- 2) Critically determine systemic causes of the current power dynamics
- 3) Reconstruct the paradigm from an alternative metaphor
- 4) Create a preferred future following regenerative principles

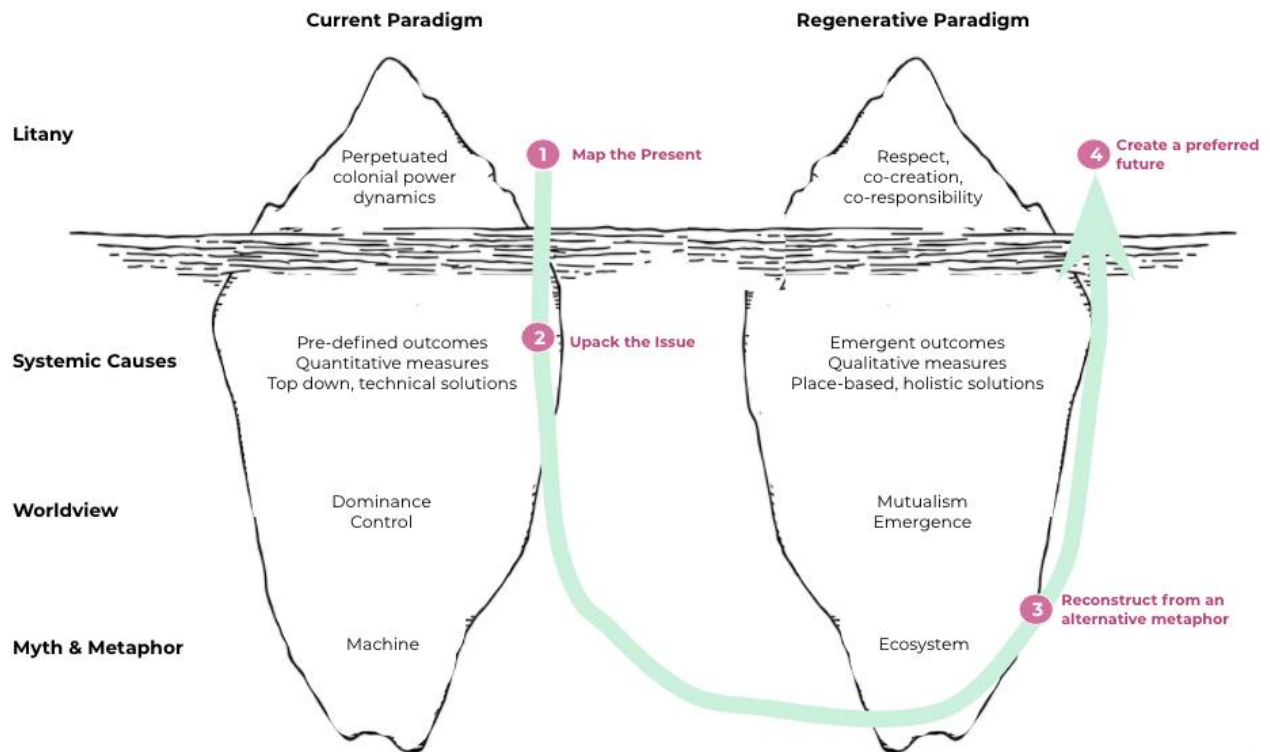


Figure 2: Causal Layered Analysis of Current and Regenerative Paradigms (author's model)

Starting with the top level of analysis (litany) of the current development paradigm, I outline the observable challenges within the system related to enduring colonial power dynamics. Moving to the lower levels, I uncover deeper systemic causes of the problem, and the still deeper worldviews that inform systemic causation. At the deepest layer, I describe the metaphors and myths that underlie worldviews and inform the entire process. By proposing an alternate myth and metaphor, I illustrate a new CLA to create the conditions for more equitable and balanced relationships in the international development system, based on regenerative principles.

International Development

Defining International Development

International development lacks a clear definition and is often used as an umbrella term for development research and practice. It is linked to efforts to reduce poverty and inequality and improve health, nutrition, education and economic opportunities of communities in the so-called 'Global South'. In recent years there has been a shift away from using the North-South binary implied with the term 'international development', and instead using 'global development'. Horner (2017) argues international development "seems increasingly inappropriate in terms of its ability to capture the various actors, processes and major challenges which our world faces in the early 21st century" (Horner, 2017, p. 3). For purposes of this paper I will be using the term 'international development' or simply 'development' to describe the sector, while recognizing boundaries between 'developed' and 'developing' countries are blurring.

Sen (1999) defined development as that which advances freedom, centered on what he calls a 'capability approach', where the basic concern of human development is "our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value", rather than the usual focus on rising GDP, technical progress, or industrialization (p. 285). Swanson (2012) builds on this definition, incorporating what she calls 'humble togetherness' inspired by the African philosophy of ubuntu, the idea that "a person is a person through their relationships with other people and expresses a way of life that exhibits other-regard" (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2019, p. 20). Extending to international development, Swanson sees the sector as a "a collective resourcement towards non-improvement and healing", including notions of mutual empowerment (ibid: 22).

These definitions provide meaningful alternatives to how development has been conceptualized in the past, as being "a mechanism for advancing the interests of global capitalism through a series of economic instruments where individual prosperity and societal progress often occur in favor of a select group and at the expense of another group or the environment" (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2019, p. 20). The following section will briefly explore the history of international development and how these hegemonic practices in development came to be.

From Colonization to Development

International development was founded on the goal of bringing Western and European definitions of modernity and progress to the rest of the world. This idea of Western development can't be fully understood without acknowledging the related underdevelopment and dependency of the Global South. The 'development' of Europe and America through the industrial revolution was only possible because of capital accumulated during the transatlantic slave trade, and the continued exploitation by colonial empires (Kpogon, 2020).

After the Second World War, colonial powers embarked on extensive 'development' programs throughout Africa and Asia, in which extraction occurred alongside social programming (Rivas, 2020). The formalization of development was initiated with Harry Truman's Inauguration speech in 1949:

We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people.

Through this, Truman popularized a new terminology that deemed half of the world (the colonies) 'underdeveloped', being tied to their poverty, primitiveness, and stagnation (Rivas, 2020). To become developed, they needed to gain skills and knowledge held by the Global North. These ideas of progress and modernity carry the unquestioned assumption of one-directional 'development', with one group defining the path, goals, and direction that the rest of the world should aspire to (ibid).

Colonial expansion through slavery and extraction was justified through racial constructs, acting as "signifiers of power that associated blackness with backwardness and acknowledged the existence of colonial nations but without their history or importance" (Rivas, 2020). These ideas were entrenched in colonial discourse, demonstrated in what Rudyard Kipling (1899) called the "White Man's Burden" - the duty of white men to bring education and salvation to the rest of the world that was deemed uncivilized.

These constructed divisions of racial hierarchies were reproduced in international development discourse through problematic binaries such as developing vs developed, low income vs high income, global South vs global North, among others. Scholars, such as Robtel Neajai Pailey (2020), write about international development's "white gaze" problem: using whiteness as the standard against which non-white people are judged, and "assuming that whiteness is the only referent of progress" (P. 730).

These rooted power structures and hierarchies continue to be expressed in international development work, through prioritizing the experiences and desires of white power structures, that "plays out in everything from monitoring and evaluation to storytelling and digital media to business development and fundraising" (Kimou, 2020). For example, in an interview with a senior practitioner having worked with a large educational INGO for over 8 years, they talked about the impact of short-term development work that's guided more by the organization's financial means than what's best for a community:

There's a challenge between when it makes sense for an INGO to enter and exit a community. Far too often I see INGOs coming in when funding is convenient, but then they're the first ones out when they no longer have the financial means to be there. Often communities can be worse off for it because they're removing systems they've become reliant on.

Acknowledging the roots of colonial power dynamics in international development is vital for change to occur. Kékéli Kpognon, Head of Human Rights Programme at Quaker Council for European Affairs urges practitioners to take on this reckoning:

“Until more development practitioners engage with the complete origin story, the sector as a whole will continue to perpetrate some racist ideas of how the world should be” (Kimou, 2020). It is critical to address the sector’s history in order to meaningfully engage with the process of decolonizing development.

The sector has made significant progress in challenging enduring colonial structures and shifting power to local agents, particularly since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 when issues of localization became a mainstream topic (UN 2015a). As a foundation for implementing the global sustainable development agenda, the Addis Agenda for Financing Development committed donors to scaling up support for local authorities (UN 2015b). John Coonrad (2021) identifies encouraging discourse leading up to these goals from then-UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, calling on world leaders to “define a clear path to a better future — a future of integrated solutions to interrelated problems” (Ki-Moon, 2011) and to “unlock local solutions” (Ki-Moon, 2015). This coincided with the Movement for Community-Led Development (MCLD) with more than 20 networks, coalitions and platforms coming together to shift power to local communities (MCLD, 2016). Further progress was made with the World Bank investing in its Community-Driven Development portfolio, and the UN identifying community engagement as a key accelerator for achieving the health SDG (Coonrad, 2021).

Along with addressing development practices and power dynamics, fundamental change towards equal donor, INGO, and community relationships needs to also involve confronting the mindsets and worldviews within the system. In my conversation with the Executive Vice President of a prominent INGO, they reiterated the importance of unpacking these deeper layers of the international development system:

Where people mostly focus is at the surface level, of policies, budgets, and practices. Think tanks write papers about what should be done at level but then nothing ever happens. Why doesn’t it happen, because the layer below that of relationships and power dynamics is really what determines what the policies, budget, and practices are. What is underlying that, are people’s mindsets and mental models. You need to think in terms of really understanding the people involved, their power dynamics and what mental models they are expressing. Then you can engage with people at that level to create change.

This paper explores regenerative development principles as the means to help change people’s mindsets and worldviews related to development work.

Regenerative Development

“Regenerative development is not about finding a magic formula that will solve the world’s problems. Rather, it enables communities to evolve beyond current conditions by growing capabilities that they don’t already possess. Regenerative development is developmental. It builds the capability of the system

it affects (such as organizations, communities, and watersheds) to serve as catalysts for continuing co-evolution” (Mang and Haggard, 2016, pg. 182).

Reimagining the INGO sector is not a new concept. Initiatives like participatory development (involving local community stakeholders in the design and implementation of projects), community-led development (empowering communities to lead development projects), and localization (shifting funds and capacity building to local and national organizations) have become foundational practices for many organizations (Rivas, 2020).

To support the transition to more equitable and locally-led development practices, regenerative development offers a framework inspired by the self-healing and self-organizing capacities of natural living systems (Mang and Reed, 2020). It is not an instruction manual for equitable development work, rather it is a set of guiding principles to follow and adapt depending on each unique context. The goal of regenerative development is to create the conditions for systems (including communities, organizations, and natural environments) to express their inherent potential for flourishing.

Beyond Sustainability

The emerging field of regenerative development marks a significant evolution in the concept and application of sustainability (Mang and Reed, 2020). Regenerative approaches go beyond reversing degradation to designing human systems that can co-evolve with natural systems.

Sustainability is recognized as the practice of meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainability paradigms are generally aimed at maintaining economic growth while meeting minimally acceptable targets for environmental and human wellbeing (Gibbons, 2020). However, sustainability goals ultimately cannot be reached if we continue the fundamental obsession with, and illusion of, perpetual quantitative growth on a finite planet, which is enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 of decent work and economic growth (Fritjof, 2019). The objective of SDG8 is that “sustained and inclusive economic growth can drive progress, create decent jobs for all and improve living standard” (UNDP, 2015).

As Pamela Mang and Bill Reed (2020) write, “practices in sustainable or green design have focused primarily on minimizing damage to the environment and human health, and using resources more efficiently, in effect, slowing down the degradation of earth’s natural systems” (p. 115). Contemporary sustainability has evolved to consider ecosystem viability and social justice, yet still tends to work with fragmented parts of systems rather than whole complex systems (Gibbons, 2020). The global challenges we face today are inherently systemic and interconnected, and as Fritjof Capra (2019) argues, “the SDGs also need to be seen as a systemic set which is interconnected and interdependent. So you can’t deal with them successfully in isolation”.

Regenerative development has been called the next wave of sustainability and represents a necessary paradigm shift from a fragmented, mechanistic worldview to a holistic, ecological worldview (Wahl,

2016). The aspiration of regenerative development is to foster thriving and flourishing living systems by accentuating their inherent potential for health and wellbeing. It recognizes the interconnectedness of all living beings, a fundamental truth embodied by many indigenous cultures for centuries.

Current Paradigm

The prevailing paradigm for international development work continues to be limited by top-down, centralized, command-and-control activities; reminiscent of the sector's old colonial, patriarchal models. These colonial power dynamics may be perpetuated through certain funding, evaluation, and measurement structures, that are based on a worldview characterized by dominance and control. The underlying metaphor that gives rise to the current paradigm is that of a machine, which views the system as made of separate and independent components. The following sections will outline each layer of the current paradigm in more detail.

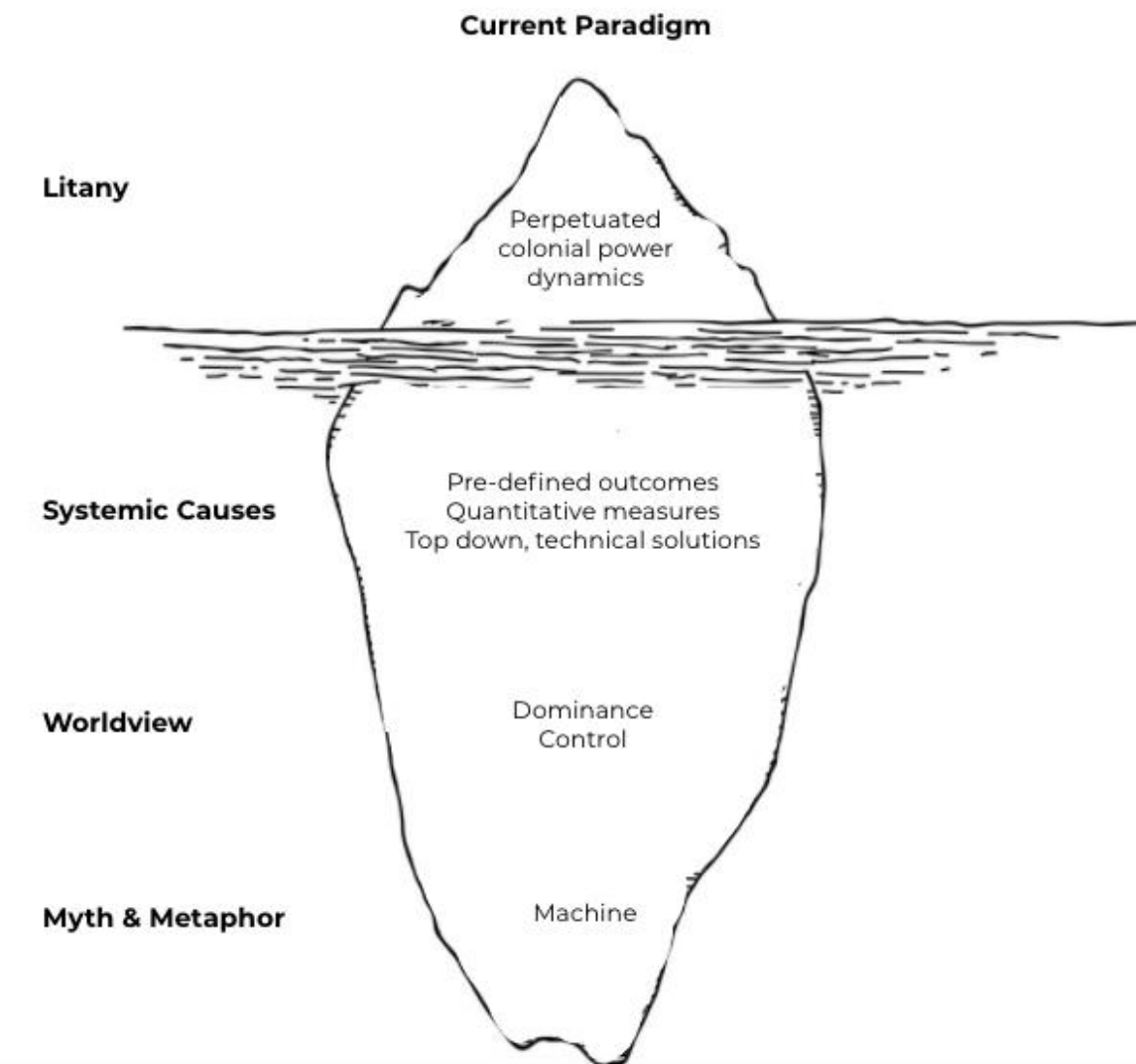


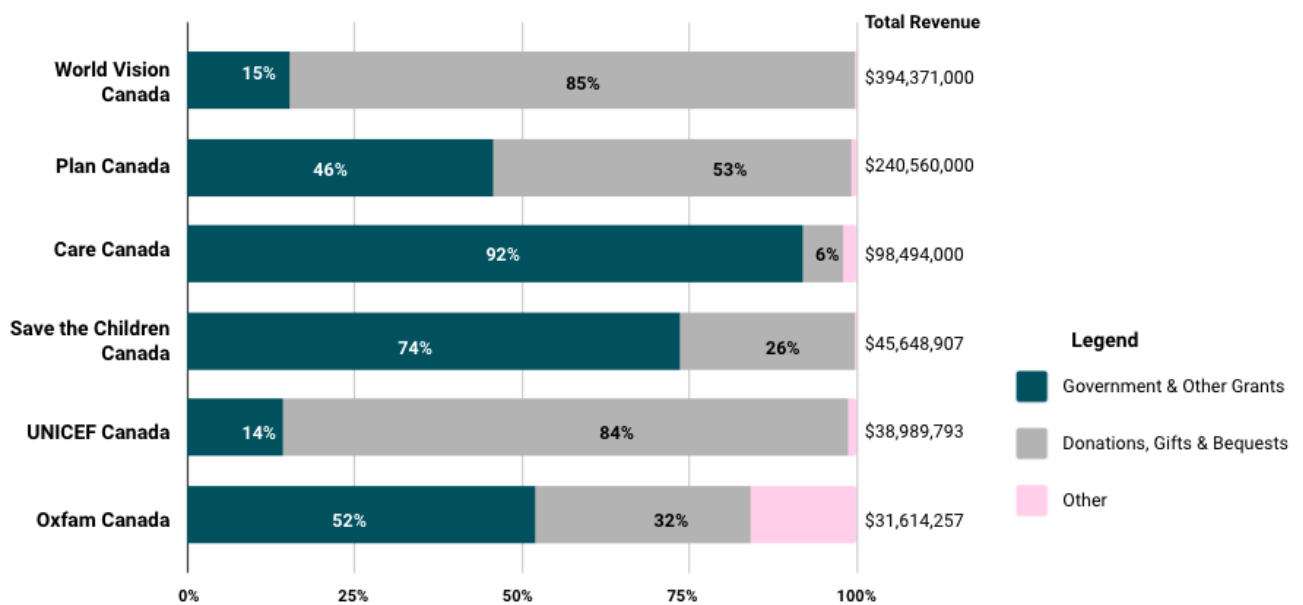
Figure 3: Causal Layered Analysis of the Current Paradigm (author's model)

1 - Litany

In Causal Layered Analysis, litany is the framework’s first level and represents observable events, trends, and problems. These are the news headlines and public descriptions of topics or issues emerging from all the layers below. The current observable trends in the international development sector highlighted in this paper are manifested in the funding mechanisms to support activities; the unequal power dynamics between donors and INGOs on the one side, and local governments, organizations, and communities on the other. Discourse around this problem can be observed in the increasing efforts towards decolonizing development, challenging institutional racism, and advocating for community-led development and localization. A key determinant of this power imbalance can be found in the international development funding structure, as outlined below.

Unequal power dynamics resulting from top-down funding flows was cited frequently in my interviews among leaders in organizations actively working to tackle this problem. As one interviewee from a micro-granting organization put it, “With our grassroots organization partners, we would like to think that we are equal partners in this. In reality, the way that it’s set up, we’re still viewed as an American NGO and it’s hard to get to true equity. They’re not organic relationships but very top-down, even when there’s an increasing effort to change that.”

The vast majority of funding for Canadian INGOs comes from two main sources: grants (including government and other institutional grants); and donations (including public donations, gifts-in-kind, and bequests). The chart below illustrates the percentage of total revenue (from 2019 - 2020) of these two funding sources from six of the largest Canadian international development NGOs: World Vision, Plan International, Care, Save the Children, UNICEF, and Oxfam.



Sources: World Vision Canada, 2020; Plan International Canada, 2020; Care Canada, 2020; Save the Children Canada, 2019; UNICEF Canada, 2019; Oxfam Canada, 2020.

Figure 4: Revenue of Canadian INGOs (author’s model)

While the percentage of grants and donations varies greatly across organizations, these two funding sources constitute between 84 - 100% of the organizations' total revenue. This means that two stakeholder groups - public donors and institutions - drive nearly all funding activities for these organizations. This is important because while some of this funding may be unearmarked (highly flexible funds with minimal spending and reporting requirements), organizations are still dependent on this revenue and need to tailor fundraising efforts to meet these stakeholders' needs. As a result, donors hold immense power in the international development system.

Institutional Funders

There are significant variations (between 14 - 92%) in development INGOs' dependence on institutional funding (as shown in Figure 4). Due to their responsibility to taxpayers, government funding is often associated with language and methods that shift risk to service providers (INGOs) who only get paid upon successful completion of pre-defined assignments aligned to current government priorities (Mahmoud, 2016). As a result, when INGOs receive a large portion of their revenue from government funders, there are often implicit or explicit pressures to conform to the priorities, operations, and discourses of that dominant donor (Munro, 2020).

These contractual, tied funding programs between governments and INGOs has been a controversial subject, and has led to concerns around whether dependence on government funding might compromise INGOs' missions and autonomy (Mahmoud, 2016). This begs the questions - to what extent are INGOs truly autonomous, and to whom are they accountable - the "beneficiaries", or the donors? Barney Tallak (2020), former director of strategy at Oxfam International describes this dilemma:

Institutional funding is now more than half of many large INGOs' income. This has created growth, but reduced strategic flexibility. It has also necessitated the use of unrestricted or light restricted public-fundraised income to cover the extra costs of superstructures. In some cases, dependency on a few core institutional donors has meant that the destiny and continued existence of the INGO, or individual members, is inextricably linked to political decisions outside their control.

INGOs often struggle to balance demands and accountability to funders on the one side and partner communities on the other (Winter, 2020). Government grants regularly come with predetermined outcomes, cumbersome reporting requirements, and discrepancies between targets and lived realities. For example, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) recently opened a request for proposals (RFP) on "Education for Refugee and Displaced Children and Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa". The 4 - 5 year multimillion dollar RFP asks Canadian INGOs to work with and directly through refugee-led organizations (RLOs) or internally-displaced people (IDP)-led organizations to deliver programming (GAC, 2021). While on the surface these localization efforts seem to be the right approach, in reality the fluid nature of RLOs and IDP organizations can make this a challenging partnership. In addition, there is a significant discrepancy between the RFP's intermediate outcomes of strengthened civil society, and the ultimate outcome of improved learning outcomes.

In an interview with a leader of global partnerships from a large Canadian INGO working in education for the past 6 years, they affirmed the unlikelihood of achieving improved learning outcomes within 4-5 years given the additional context constraints. In their words, “The recent GAC RFP tells me that there’s a desire and push to localize and that’s great, but they may be skipping a couple of steps. They want too much way too soon and they’re looking at the end goal of localized IDPs running their own show within a 5-10 year time horizon and these are 50-100 year agendas”.

When organizations depend on these government grants for their survival, as many Canadian INGOs do, they have little choice but to conform to these constrictive and sometimes unrealistic parameters.

Public Donors

The other major source of revenue for Canadian INGOs are individual and corporate donors, providing funding through donations, gifts-in-kind, and bequests. Comprising up to 85% of revenue (see Figure 4), these public donors wield significant power in development relationships. Unequal power dynamics between donors, INGOs and community members emerge not just through the pressure for INGOs to demonstrate impact to their donors, but also through the acts of storytelling and giving.

Fundraising for public donations follows a very predictable formula. Donors need to feel emotionally connected in order to give, which is difficult when an organization is fundraising for projects in other parts of the world (Sutton, 2019). To create this emotional connection fundraisers highlight stories of individuals, often disclosing highly personal information and spotlighting the organization's role in improving their lives. These narratives become problematic for several reasons. For one, it creates a simplified image of large groups of people because a compelling narrative by definition must leave out important information that takes away the complexities and nuances of the person’s lived experiences. Second, the people whom these stories are written about don’t always have the ability to write their own narratives or consent to the final copy that gets released to the public. This creates one-directional storytelling, allowing organizations to define what’s important to include about a person or community, and what isn’t.

Stories about organizations empowering community members to make changes in their lives are pervasive in the industry. However, as Omakwu (2020) writes, “empowerment is a ubiquitous term in the development sector, but we don’t talk about power nearly enough. Empowerment is gaining a platform to share your story. Power is deciding the stories that get told”. The stories themselves perpetuate unequal power dynamics through problematic, incomplete, and selective storytelling. This was demonstrated in the Kony 2012 campaign - a viral video led by the non-profit Invisible Children to raise awareness about warlord Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda. The campaign employed “dubious, exaggerated, and sometimes incorrect causal relations and information [were] presented in order to simplify the conflict and inflate Invisible Children’s role in stopping it” which led to “blatant misreading of the conflict’s dynamics in favor of a sort of misplaced narcissism” (Titeca and Sebastian, 2014).

Anand Giridharadas extends this critique, condemning the act of giving itself as perpetuating unequal power dynamics in humanitarian aid and international development. Specifically referring to elite giving, Giridharadas (2020) argues, “maybe the giving, while doing some good for some people [...] helps uphold social arrangements, justifies those social arrangements, in ways that actually uphold the system that grinds more people down, locks more people out, shortens more lives than ANY of that do-gooding, ALL of that do-gooding put together”. Peter Buffer (2013) calls this “conscious laundering”, defined as “feeling better about accumulating more than any one person could possibly need to live on by sprinkling a little around as an act of charity”.

Considering the importance of receiving consistent funding from individual and corporate donors, organizations inevitably (either explicitly or implicitly) build donors’ emotional needs into their program design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. Even when development is framed as participatory, because INGOs hold the resources and are bound to meet the requirements and needs of their institutional and public donors, projects are in many ways either directly or indirectly led by donors.

The influence map below illustrates this often one-directional, hierarchical relationship, with power in international development work coming primarily from individual, corporate, and institutional donors. One interviewee described the impact of one-directional funding on their relationships with local partners:

If there was more of a channel for money to go directly to those organizations, it would make that partnership a lot more equitable. Money comes with power and confidence - it’s our money that we got with our grant, so we want to implement it this way.

Influence Diagram of Funding Relationships in International Development

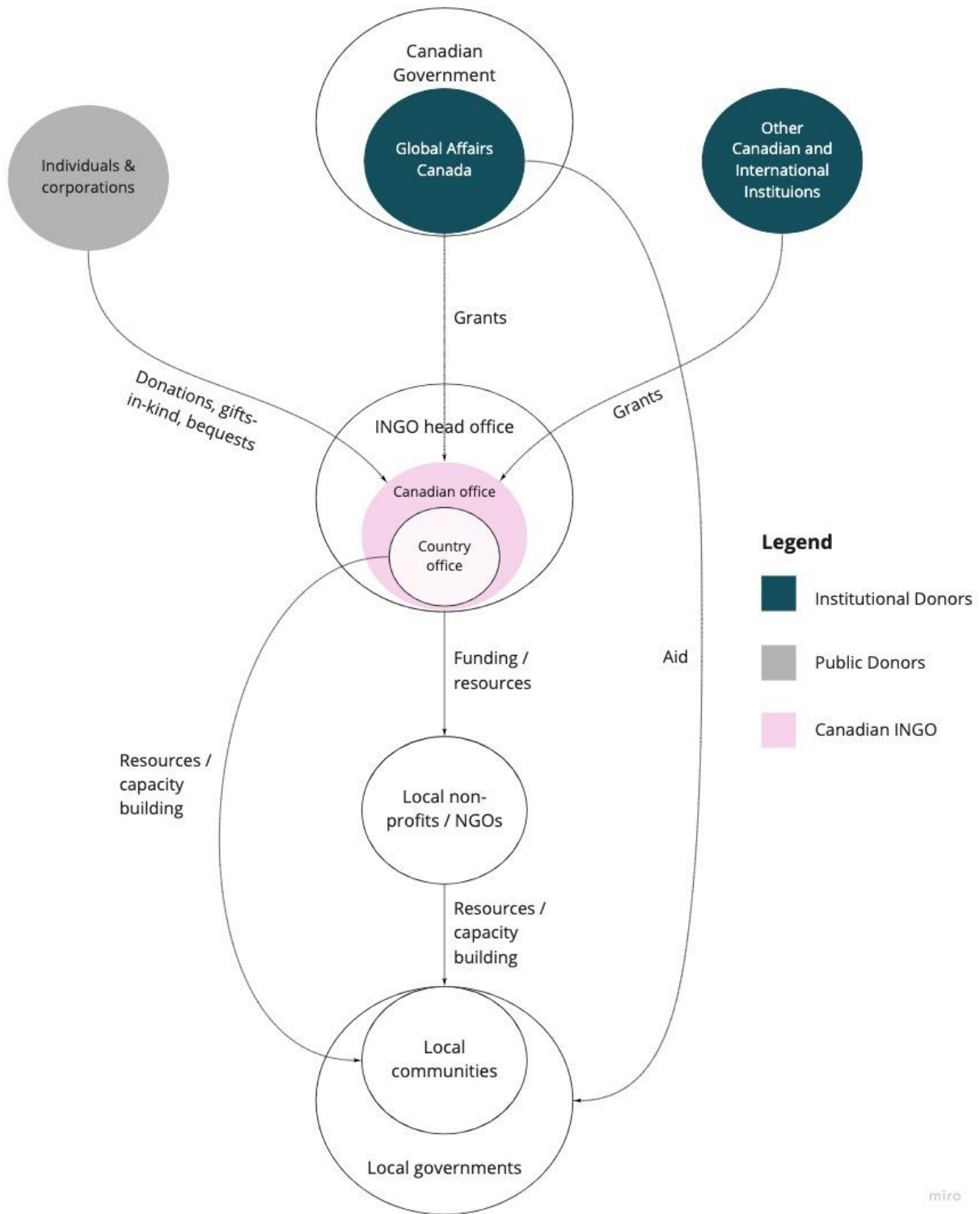


Figure 5: Influence Diagram of Funding Relationships (author's model)

2 - Systemic Causes

The second level of CLA is concerned with systemic causes of the first level. These include the social, economic, cultural, political and historical factors that give rise to observable events and trends (Inayatullah, 1998). The perpetuation of unequal power dynamics in international development can be attributed to research and funding structures that focus on primarily quantitative, pre-defined and top-down activities.

Pre-Defined Outcomes

Outcomes are often represented through pre-defined measurable indicators of change, often aligning with international measures to allow for cross-country analyses of evidence (Coultas, 2019). In requests for proposals, funders will outline the targets they want applicants to reach, based on the funders' own priorities. NGOs and other applicants are required to show an evaluation plan for how they will achieve their pre-defined outcomes, given their resources and within their specific contexts. The most commonly used tool for measuring and evaluating outcomes is the logframe or logic model (see Figure 6 below), which attributes chains of inputs (e.g. money), to outputs (e.g. activities, numbers of 'beneficiaries reached'), to outcomes and impact (Coultas, 2019). These pre-defined outcome frameworks pose a challenge for equitable involvement of communities. As stated by Melanie Pinet and Carmen Leon-Himmelstine (2020) from the Overseas Development Institute, "theories of change, Indicators and logical frameworks are often set by Western researchers and institutions with some but not in-depth understanding of the social norms and local realities".

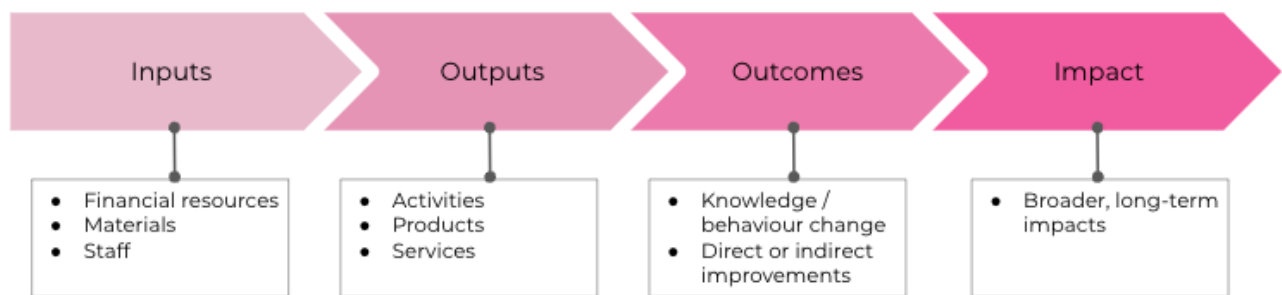


Figure 6: Logframe Example (author's model)

Coultas' (2019) study underscores the widely recognized problems in logframes, "owing to their linear representations of complex social practices" (p. 98). For example, in qualitative study of users' experience of monitoring and evaluation systems in HIV interventions in Western India, Sukla et al. (2016), they found that outcomes were context-dependent, which means "the process of designing M&E systems needs to allow for greater grassroots participation in the definition of objectives and monitoring practices, and flexibility in the choice of indicators" (p. 13). The study concludes by acknowledging "the activity of monitoring is being constituted as an instrument of performance

management and disciplining of NGOs, and not as an instrument of rational programme improvement” (ibid: 14).

The impact of confining to pre-defined outcomes as a tool for determining flows of resources from donors to implementing INGOS, is a “hegemony of results-based management [which] decimates their capacity to function as locally-intelligent means of programme improvement” (Sukla et al., 2016, p. 14). Coultas (2019) relates this to the sector’s colonial legacy:

In international development, the colonial legacies that situate it are undeniable: most intervention contexts are post-colonisation; donors often represent ex-colonisers, and so too do the languages that dominate communication in the international (Spivak, 2008); and the logics of bureaucracy and democracy upon which a representative international system of evidence-making depends can be traced through the histories of colonial rule (Kaviraj, 2010) (p. 97).

With global donors and implementing INGOS defining outcomes, it can be challenging to reach equitable relationships and meaningful community-led involvement.

Quantitative Measures & Top-Down Solutions

Incorporating a balance of qualitative research practices and measures of success as well as quantitative data is considered best practice in the industry (Cornish, 2015b). Although it can be challenging to measure qualitative changes in beliefs, behaviours and ways of thinking, these nuanced evaluations provide a complete picture of a project’s impact, instead of focusing solely on the numbers. This requires an approach to monitoring and evaluation that takes into account deeper emotive and behavioural tendencies, not just surface level participatory and technical changes. Measurement is tied to outcomes, and when outcomes are defined by global NGOs and donors, often the ways of measuring are defined as well. The process, and thus the power dynamics continue to be perpetuated.

Julia Sánchez (2020), the former President-CEO of the Canadian Council of International Cooperation (CCIC), and now the head of ActionAid International, questions the effectiveness of evaluation methods that struggle to account for indirect impacts:

And donors, whether private or public, ask for ‘results’: How many lives were saved or livelihoods created? All NGOs struggle with contribution versus attribution. Did our funding save a life, or did it make a difference in conjunction with the contribution of others, not least those of the recipients themselves? When the northern contribution is just financial, who deserves the credit? How do we make the shift in perception of aid recipients from victims to actors? What about identifying and tackling the underlying unfair rules of trade and finance and “might makes right” in conflict resolution?

Another problem facing the industry is the temptation to rely on top-down, technocratic solutions - the mistaken belief that technology can deliver solutions to deeper-seated structural problems (Hartley, 2019). The term “technocratic” implies that poverty is a technical problem that can be solved through scientific and apolitical solutions (Easterly, 2014). For example, providing vitamin A capsules to people

suffering from malnutrition, spraying chemicals to kill mosquitos that spread malaria, or drilling wells to provide clear water. Easterly (2016) examined an extensive technical report published in 1983 by British colonial official Lord Hailey on how to ‘solve poverty in Africa’. Easterly drew comparisons between solutions presented in the paper, and recommendations made in a 2005 United Nations Report (see Figure 7). He concludes that systemic problems cannot be solved exclusively by experts offering technical solutions: “there were already experts in 1938 that already knew the answers. It did not work then and it’s not working now” (ibid: 7).

Technocratic solutions to poverty 1938 and 2005

African problem to be addressed	Solution: Afircan survey 1938	Solution: UN report 2005
Malaria	Spraying native huts with pyrethrum	Indoor spraying (pyrethroids)
Malnutrition	Address deficiency of vitamin A	Address inadequate intake of vitamin A
Clear water	Sinking boreholes	Increase boreholes

Figure 7: Technocratic solutions to poverty 1938 and 2005 (Easterly, 2016)

The downfall of these types of solutions is that they don’t take into account the complexities of local contexts, and don’t address deeper systemic causes of the problems they’re trying to address (ibid). It is worth noting that technocratic solutions may be appropriate in some circumstances. Relatively simple problems and simple contexts in which more traditional, linear programming approaches and solutions can be valid. However, relying on these types of approaches for systemic problems without deeply understanding a local context can perpetuate a structure in which external, global actors are dominant over local actors.

The move away from primarily top-down, pre-defined, quantitative funding and research activities presents barriers. As Pinet and Leon-Himmelstine (2020) argue, “research commissioners promote and expect equal partnerships alongside high research quality but they rarely provide organisations with the tools, budget and flexibility to make it work in practice”.

3 - Worldview

“Today’s thinking shapes how we enact tomorrow’s reality” - Otto C. Scharmer, 2013

The third level of analysis is concerned with the discourse or worldview that supports and legitimizes the systemic dynamics of the second layer (Inayatullah, 1998). At this depth, we can examine how different discourses “do more than cause or mediate the issue but constitute it, how the discourse we use to understand is complicit in our framing of the issue” (ibid: 820).

A worldview is how we understand our position on the planet. The worldview that gives rise to funding and research activities that rely on top-down, quantitative, pre-defined parameters might embody qualities of control and dominance. Embedded in this is the belief that humans are the dominant species and have the power and right to exploit nature (and by extension, other groups of people) for their own profit. Wapner (2010) calls this the “dream of mastery” - the idea that humanity is at the center of life and nature should be tamed, controlled, and exploited for our benefit. This dualist view of nature and society is one of the main characteristics of the western culture (Leis, 1999).

These ways of understanding the world and our place within it have shaped our relationship to the rest of nature and to each other. This worldview is characteristic of the West, and has had widespread impacts on the way we relate to the environment, other people, and ourselves. It is mirrored in many facets of society - from chemicals used to control pests in industrial agriculture, to addictive algorithms used to influence social media users, to the hierarchical structure of corporations. The belief that humans have dominance over other living beings and constitute separate parts of a machine (instead of contributing to an interconnected ecosystem), inform the way we relate to one another. In the context of international development, the attachment to control and dominance manifests in the way funding is given, how monitoring and evaluation activities are structured, and what solutions are prioritized.

4 - Myth & Metaphor

The fourth and deepest layer of analysis is the metaphor or myth. These are the stories, collective archetypes, and unconscious dimensions of the problem (Inayatullah, 1998). This level connects the worldview to an emotional or gut-level knowing, and gives rise to all the levels above. The metaphor that underpins the control and dominance worldview is that of a machine composed of separate parts. Capra and Luisi (2014) describe the mechanistic paradigm as stemming from the analytical, reductionist way of thinking that dominated Western scientific thinking since the time of Descartes and Newton. They describe Descartes’ mechanistic conception of the world as Cartesian reductionism:

All of nature works according to mechanical laws, and everything in the material world can be explained in terms of the arrangement and movements of its parts. This implies that one should be able to understand all aspects of complex structures - plants, animals, or the human body - by reducing them to their smallest constituent parts (ibid: 35)

While it is true that the *structures* of living organisms are composed of living parts, the problem is that their *properties* cannot be explained in terms of their parts alone (ibid). This worldview affects not only how we relate to our environment, but also how we feel individually, and creates a state of isolation and disconnection. Philosophers call this “species loneliness” - “a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely when we can no longer call out to our neighbors” (Kimmer, 2013).

Functioning as a machine implies the need for constant oversight, energy inputs, and fixing; driving for efficiency and productivity as the number one goal within a hierarchical system. This was demonstrated in one interview as the participant described the sector: “It’s become a machine so big that even though everyone is working on their own projects with good intentions, they have no idea if that’s contributing to a bigger outcome, or contradicting something else”. Another interviewee described the system as being “the antithesis of a holistic system. You have all these different players operating in the same area with overlapping messages that undermine each other. That kind of chaos and mayhem happens all the time. We’re getting more and more fragmented”. The industrial-era mechanistic paradigm was particularly influential in shaping the ‘development’ of much of the world, and continues to play a significant role in our lives (Mang and Reed, 2020).

Critiques of international development work seldom go beyond conventional framing of the issue to reach this level of analysis. However, when engaging in practices to decolonize development and create regenerative relationships embodying natural systems, it is vital to reach this level of understanding that is rooted in indigenous traditions around the world. Aboriginal spirituality, Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo says, “is a feeling of oneness, of belonging”, a connectedness with “deep innermost feelings”. Everything else is secondary. (Mudrooroo, 1995).

Regenerative development movements have been criticized for borrowing practices from indigenous cultures without encompassing indigenous worldviews and the deep cultural and relational approaches needed for collective healing (Cultural Survival, 2020). In a recent message from 10 indigenous leaders and organizations on regenerative agriculture, practitioners were encouraged “to not just ‘take’ practices from Indigenous cultures without their context, but to also encompass the deeper Indigenous worldviews... inspiring a consciousness shift that hopefully will support us to go from a dominant culture of supremacy and domination to one founded on reciprocity, respect, and interrelations with all beings” (ibid).

Capra and Luisi (2014) conclude that “transcending the mechanistic view of organizations will be as critical for the survival of human civilization as transcending the mechanistic conceptions of health, the economy, or biotechnology” (pg. 59). These issues are all linked to the profound transformation towards a new systemic conception of life (ibid).

Regenerative Paradigm

A regenerative paradigm of international development relationships begins with an alternative metaphor - shifting from a fragmented machine to an interconnected ecosystem. Recognizing the interdependence of elements within natural and social systems, a new worldview can arise; one defined by mutualistic relationships and allowing for emergence (versus dominance and control, coming from the mechanistic narrative). Consequently, structures built from an ecosystem, symbiotic, and emergent understanding of the world can uphold these qualities through monitoring and evaluation activities and program design. These structures can, in turn, give rise to relationships between donors, INGOs and local communities defined by respect, co-creation, and co-responsibility.

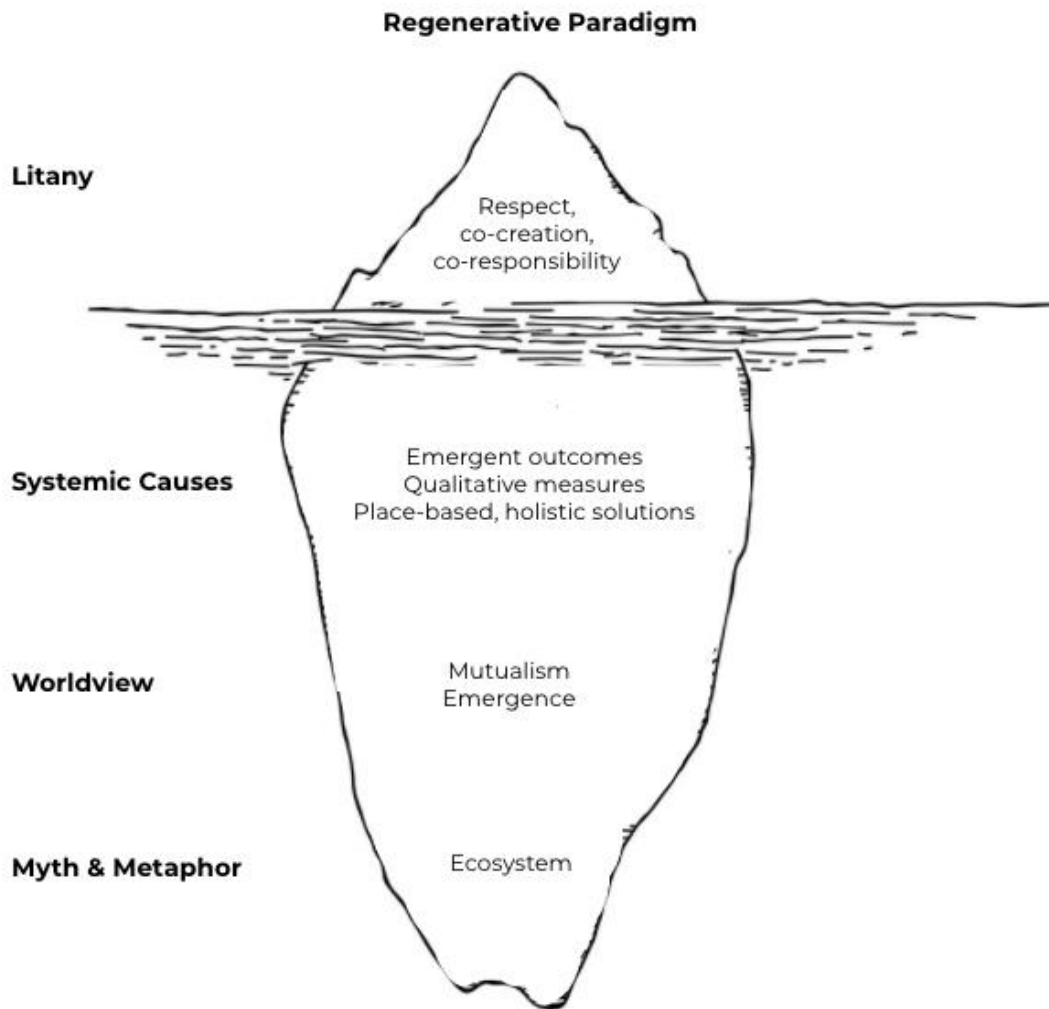


Figure 8: Causal Layered Analysis of a Regenerative Paradigm (author's model)

5 - Myth & Metaphor

“The role of humanity on Earth should be repositioned from an ego-centred position to understanding that we are inherently a part of, and fully dependent on the web of life on the planet. To adopt this role, we need to become aware of the need of regenerative sustainability” (Brown, 2021).

Beginning with the foundational belief that humans are not separate from nature, new layers of reality based on reciprocity and balance can emerge. The ecosystem worldview is grounded in this belief, and recognizes all living beings as interconnected. The shift from a mechanistic, ego-centric worldview to a living systems, eco-centric worldview is encapsulated in recent discoveries among contemporary scientists, as described by Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi (2014):

As the twenty-first century unfolds, a new scientific conception is emerging. It is a unified view that integrates, for the first time, life’s biological, cognitive, social, and economic dimensions. At the forefront of contemporary science, the universe is no longer seen as a machine composed of elementary building blocks. We have discovered that the material world, ultimately, is a network of inseparable patterns of relationships; that the planet as a whole is a living, self-regulating system. [...] Evolution is no longer seen as a competitive struggle for existence, but rather a cooperative dance in which creativity and constant emergence of novelty are the driving forces. And with the new emphasis on complexity, networks, and patterns of organization, a new science of qualities is slowly emerging.

This worldview is also characteristic of many indigenous ways of knowing. As described by indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete on the topic of ‘indigenous worldview’ and ‘rightful orientation’ (in conversation with Te Ahukaramü Charles Royal, 2002):

...you know there is a certain way to relate to a place that seems proper, seems appropriate, and seems to be respectful. I think that one of the things that most indigenous peoples did if not all, is that when they went to a place, especially a place they were going to settle... build a community, that they first of all asked permission of that place, its plants, its animals, of that place if they could come and live there, to come to some kind of respectful mutual relationship with that place, so from there that starts a kind of a covenant, that extends through generations, a covenant that’s established between a people and that place so that they deal with it in a respectful and a, lets put it this way, a mutually, reciprocal type of relationship. This whole notion of rightful orientation, kind of a philosophical concept for setting the stage for appropriate long term relationship...

Jacqueline Marie Rahm (2014) writes “the healing of the western mind rests with shifting the dominant paradigm toward a fundamental axiom of holism found within the life-ways of American Indigenous peoples” (p. v). In living systems, everything is nested - always part of some larger system and made up of smaller living systems. We need to understand this reality in order to design flourishing and regenerative systems. Pamela Mang and Ben Haggard (2016) outline the consequences of failing to adopt this worldview: “Too often, people design systems with inadequate understanding of how their effects, positive and negative, will move outward into larger and larger systems (or inward into smaller

and smaller systems). As a result, they create unintended consequences and fail to deliver the value of what our projects are inherently incapable” (ibid: 19).

If the international development system was redesigned to function as an ecosystem, what might change? If INGOs recognized the connection between their donors’ actions and the wellbeing of the communities they work with, how might they approach those relationships differently?

6 - Worldview

“Can we live with a forest in a way that makes it possible for the forest to evolve? To me, that’s very different from asking how to harvest the forest appropriately” - Charles G. Krone

A key component of the ecosystem metaphor is that every living system (including human systems) has inherently within it the possibility to evolve. This evolutionary drive is inherently creative and unpredictable, and has been key to life’s existence for four billion years (Mang and Haggard, 2016). “Failure to take it into account when we design puts us in conflict with the nature of living systems and our own nature as humans” (ibid: 10). For international development practitioners, this means recognizing the built-in evolutionary capacity of all stakeholders and fostering their inherent creativity, instead of working with communities in isolation from their context.

Functioning as an ecosystem, it is possible to give rise to a worldview defined by mutualism and emergence. Mutualistic relationships occur when two or more groups, species, or individuals work together to benefit from the relationship. One example of a mutualistic relationship in nature is that of bees and flowers. Bees rely on flowers for their food, gather nectar as they fly from flower to flower. In turn, flowers rely on bees to cross-pollinate their female plants. When bees land in a flower, pollen sticks to their hairy bodies which then gets transferred to the next flower they land in, and pollinates the plant. In this mutualistic relationship, the bees are able to eat and the flowering plants get to reproduce. Mutualistic relationships are abundant in natural ecosystems.

Another defining characteristic of ecosystems (one that is echoed in regenerative development principles), is the idea of emergence. In living systems, systemic health cannot be predicted and controlled, but rather is “a scale-linking, emergent property of healthy interactions and relationships within complex dynamic systems” (Wahl, 2016). While we can’t design or predict specific outcomes of evolution, we can create evolutionary-friendly conditions that influence the trajectory of change (Mang and Haggard, 2016).

The implications for international development might mean adopting new measures of success. For example, ecologist C.S. Holling suggested that in very complex systems, wealth should be measured in the ability to evolve and adapt (ibid). By this measure, “the wealth or poverty of a great city might be measured by the agility or opportunism with which it addresses climate disruptions, a capability related more to the capacity for rapid and powerful collective learning than to the median income of its residents” (ibid).

How might INGOs and donors support the natural capability of living communities to evolve towards greater value and creativity? This process involves embracing complexity, and letting go of the need to predict and control specific outcomes. How can practitioners create evolution-friendly conditions in their projects? How might success be defined by the ability for a project to thrive and continue to evolve into the future, and for unexpected opportunities to emerge? What would need to change in their relationship dynamics to allow for this emergent process to unfold?

7 - Systemic Causes

Stemming from a worldview that embraces the realities of an ecosystem model instead of a machine model, alternative systems can be created to allow for regenerative and balanced relationships to emerge in international development. These systemic causes are presented as suggestions based on regenerative development literature, and provide possible directions for donors and INGOs to move towards.

Emergent outcomes

Functioning as an ecosystem presents both challenges and opportunities for development practitioners. It requires a shift from working on problems in isolation from their context, to being in close relationship to local complexities. This shift invites a far higher level of unpredictability into development work, and as Mang and Haggard (2016) write, designers and practitioners “recognize the degree to which unpredictability is already present. By abandoning the illusion of control, designers enter a deep practice, fostering the inherent creativity of the systems in which they are working”.

Adaptive management is an approach to tackling complex international development challenges, offered as an alternative to approaches that emphasize adherence to detailed plans to solve development problems in a more linear, mechanistic way (O’Donnell, 2016). Similar to design thinking, it is a flexible approach that begins with the assumption of uncertainty about the correct intervention, and involves stages of testing, monitoring, getting feedback, and iterating (ibid). In practice, the implementation and management of most interventions falls somewhere along a spectrum between linear and adaptive, or controlled and emergent (ibid).

To embrace emergence, development funding could allow for more flexibility and integration of complexity. Cornish (2015) recommends “policy might support local experimentation by reducing the emphasis on reaching pre-determined, national-level objectives” (p. 269). He says the “messy” quality of local particularities “do not imply unknowable, unpredictable, or paralysing chaos. But they do imply complexity, and interdependence of phenomena and their context (ibid). However, to engage donors (particularly governments) in providing more flexible, unearmarked funding, there would need to be strong risk management policies to ensure donors aren’t implicated in any negative consequences of their funded projects.

Holistic Solutions and Qualitative Measures

By implication of adopting emergent outcomes, practitioners and donors need corresponding measures of success. Qualitative research should be a key component of the planning, design, development and evaluation of development programs (Cornish, 2015b). In the Capra and Henderson (2013) publication on Qualitative Growth, the authors argue, “we cannot understand the nature of complex systems such as organisms, ecosystems, societies, and economies if we describe them in purely quantitative terms”. Since “qualities arise from processes and patterns of relationships” they need to be mapped rather than measured (ibid).

Practitioners adopting ‘people-centered development’ understand the vitality of qualitative research for matching programs to local needs, context, and preferences (Cornish, 2015b). Qualitative research tools allow for systematically assessing local people’s perspectives and experiences to inform the design of a program, as well as measuring its impacts.

A frequent challenge brought up in qualitative research is how to demonstrate findings are accurate, representative, free from unacknowledged bias, and soundly interpreted (Camfield and Palmer-Jones, 2013). This is important because many development agencies and institutional donors have bureaucratic cultures that are risk averse, sometimes excessively so (Canales and Sheldon, 2019; Donsworth and Cheesman, 2018). This risk-aversion might pose a barrier to incorporating more qualitative measures of success instead of relying on more standard quantitative measures.

However, the sector is moving in this direction as stories of unused donor-funded agricultural machinery, latrines, and wells are all too common (Cornish, 2015b). These cliché development projects failed to take into account local contexts and qualitative measures of success when trying to implement them (ibid). For example, a report on a massive latrine building program in Odisha, India which failed to increase latrine usage despite widespread builds, found that “the health benefits generally associated with sanitation cannot be assumed simply by construction of latrines” (ibid). Qualitative data measuring behaviors, emotions, and thoughts are vital to ensuring programs take into account the complexities of local contexts.

Instead of donors and INGOs holding the power in development relationships, if the funding structures were more flexible, focused on qualitative measures and allow for emergent outcomes, there might be less pressure for INGOs to prioritize the needs of their donors, and instead foster truly balanced relationships among the communities they work with.

8 - Litany

At the top of the regenerative development paradigm, relationships are defined by respect, co-creation, and co-responsibility. This reality is supported by underlying structures around funding, monitoring and

evaluation, and project design, and are informed by deeper worldviews. The foundation of this paradigm is the recognition of our interconnectedness within a living ecosystem.

The shift away from expert-led projects and top-down approaches to decision-making characteristics of traditional development could lead towards less hierarchical forms of leadership with an emphasis on co-design (Flink and Blyth, 2020). To create spaces for true co-design, there must first be a mutual field of respect. As Mang and Haggard (2016) say, “a project can only create systemic benefit within a field of caring, co-creativity, and co-responsibility” (p. 33). A genuine spirit of connection and caring is critical if diverse stakeholders are to engage in equitable partnerships.

Development projects have been moving in this direction for decades by facilitating bottom-up solutions and increased ‘beneficiary participation’ (Flink and Blyth, 2020). However, shifting from a closely managed, top-down process to one that is genuinely participatory can be challenging. Considering the hierarchical power structures mentioned in previous sections as well as the personal struggles in shifting power, this process “challenges people’s ability to go outside of their comfort zone, do things differently, and define their personal skills when encountering resistance and conflict” (Batshalom, 2009).

Following regenerative development principles, Mang and Haggard (2016) offer five guidelines to implement this approach and foster relationships defined by respect, co-creation and co-responsibility:

1. **Start from a collective dialogue of discovering potential:** regenerative projects always start from potential, not problems. A problem-solving orientation can inhibit our ability to work systemically and holistically, as it brings a single fragment to the foreground without the border context. Regenerative development recognizes problems are typically symptoms of complex, upstream, systemic causes. By starting from potential, people begin to generate their own enthusiasm because they discover different ways of looking at problems. Beginning a project by dialogue with a community about its own potential fosters a field of mutual caring.
2. **Create an “equation of co-responsibility”:** as opposed to asking for suggestions and feedback on project decisions, participatory design requires stakeholders to take responsibility, by aligning around a common purpose large enough in scope to bind them together.
3. **Approach design as a reciprocal developmental process:** Mang and Reed (2016) boldly state “preconceived solutions have no place in regeneration” (p. 194). Instead, regenerative approaches require humility and inquiry, allowing for emergent ideas to come from ongoing community dialogue.
4. **Use core values as a source of creativity:** Core values can act as a source of inspiration and partnership for project stakeholders, especially when conflicts arise and lead to rigid thinking. Clearly articulated, shared values can be used as a basis for reconciliation, lifting all stakeholders to higher levels of creativity.
5. **Co-invent tools and methodologies appropriate to the unique character of a place:** Rather than using existing approaches that have proven successful in other contexts, developing unique, place-specific solutions enriches innovative thinking. This requires embracing *not*

knowing over knowing, which can be hard for seasonal professionals to let go of the need to have all the right answers. But that is precisely the way to discover new answers.

Conclusion

The international development sector has made significant progress in shifting towards localization and community-led practices, and away from top-down, centralized models of traditional development. However, as indicated by recent increases in advocacy to decolonize development, structures that perpetuate unequal power dynamics persist. To meaningfully engage with decolonization in this context, the full colonial history of international development work needs to be acknowledged, as well as identifying and engaging with systemic factors that perpetuate colonial structures.

Using the Causal Layered Analysis, I synthesized primary and secondary research into four levels of analysis to understand how the current development paradigm is created and maintained. At the deepest level, the metaphor of a machine (in which the system is made of separate, isolated components) gives rise to a worldview in which outcomes are primarily achieved through control and dominance. This worldview creates funding, measurement and evaluation structures that perpetuate colonial power dynamics.

Using regenerative development principles, I outlined an alternative narrative to create the conditions for a new paradigm to emerge. Following regenerative principles, the metaphor of an ecosystem recognizes all system components as interconnected and interdependent. This gives rise to a worldview of mutualism and emergent outcomes, in turn supporting structures that encourage relationships defined by respect, co-creation and co-responsibility.

To support the move away from an outdated, top-down charity model toward a regenerative, solidarity model, INGOs need to engage in a collective transformation. Otherwise, they risk losing credibility and relevance in a changing world. Julia Sánchez (2020), the former President-CEO of the Canadian Council of International Cooperation (CCIC) and current head of ActionAid International, outlined this transformation for INGOs as taking place in four key areas:

- becoming smaller, with a greater share of funds going directly to local civil society organizations
- defining different roles for themselves and using more effort in partnerships and networks they don't control
- pressing for the regulations that govern their relations with individual and government donors to change – a change that the Canadian government has been very slow to undertake
- serious testing of alternatives to northern hero/southern victim fundraising tactics.

Opportunities and Risks

There may be several barriers to transforming and adopting this new paradigm. First, addressing the funding structure may pose a challenge. In this paper, top-down funding in which donors directly or indirectly determine project activities and outcomes was identified as a key leverage point for change. However, there are currently no policies or structures that regulate donor control over funding. Donors themselves are able to set those limits, and (particularly with government donors), terms and conditions associated with funding are often very rigid. To move towards regenerative structures in which funding is flexible and allows for emergent outcomes versus strictly pre-defined goals, there needs to be a clear incentive both for donors and policy makers. This will require additional research to demonstrate the impacts of alternative funding structures as compelling evidence to move in this direction.

This change also requires a deeper shift at the worldview and metaphor levels. How might the sector become an interconnected ecosystem driven by holistic programs and mutualistic relationships instead of a top-down, project-based, fragmented machine? How might leaders in donor agencies, foundations, and INGOs align their work, policies, and relationships with the principles found in natural systems? Sohail Inayatullah (1998) suggests change at the metaphor level is articulated “through a poem, a story, an image or some other right-brain method”, and is initiated by leaders and artists (p. 821). This level of change can appear to be the most challenging. However, Donella Meadows (2008) asserts that while societies firmly resist challenges to their worldview (or ‘paradigm’), changes at the individual level aren’t necessarily as difficult: “there’s nothing physical or expensive or even slow in the process of paradigm change. In a single individual it can happen in a millisecond. All it takes is a click in the mind, a falling of scales from eyes, a new way of seeing”.

The challenge, as Inayatulla (2004) describes, is to engage all levels of a system to create transformation: “CLA seeks to move up and down levels, asking how might the litany look through different lenses. It seeks to move beyond technocratic solutions, those devised at the systemic level. It also seeks to move beyond the worldview to the mythic level” (p. 8). This paper has attempted to take the reader through several levels of the current development system, and a new regenerative one. The paper offers a continuation of existing research on systems change, decolonization, and reimagining INGOs, and a suggestion for further exploration on embodying living systems principles at the individual and systemic levels within international development.

There seems to be an appetite for this type of transformation not only in development but across sectors as people become increasingly aware of the interlinked social, economic, and environmental crises we currently face. These crises call on us, more than ever, to understand the complexity of life and how to be a collaborative agent of change within an increasingly unpredictable world. As Pamela Mang suggests, “The present moment offers the potential, born of crisis, to transform the way humans inhabit Earth” (p. XVII).

Next Steps

A possible next step for this research could be to collect case studies of flexible, unearmarked grants and other innovative funding structures that allow for emergent outcomes and focus on qualitative reporting. This additional research could document the risks, opportunities, and impact of these case studies as evidence to potentially move larger government funders more in this direction. Another opportunity from this research could be to host a collaborative workshop with both INGO and regenerative practitioners to imagine the future of international development relationships, from a regenerative lens. It might also be worthwhile to experiment with alternative metaphors within the CLA that bring about different futures.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide for International Development Practitioners

Background

1. Tell me a bit about your background and why you chose to work in this industry.
2. Tell me about your current role and how you contribute to the overall mission of your organization.

Underlying Metaphors

3. What metaphor would you use to describe international development?
4. How would you describe your organization within this metaphor?

Vision and Strategy

5. Describe your organization's long term vision
6. Do you plan for a time in the future when your organization will no longer be needed? Why or why not?

Programs

7. To what degree are your programs scalable and replicable? Why is this important or not important to you?

Closing

8. Is there anything else you'd like me to know, or do you have any final thoughts on this topic?

Appendix B: Synthesis of Interview Data

POTENTIAL



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STRATEGY

Why we don't teach people to fish: we need to cut the barb wire off the pond	shift resources to local organizations	need streamlined methods of grassroots organizations to be accountable for funds	Pooled funds - orgs can put money into this and local orgs can apply for that bucket	Need to understand the middle level of power dynamics and what mindsets and beliefs they're expressing
What's the mental model of the local government, and how can we shift that	Having simple frameworks to talk about basic elements of development is useful at the local level	Getting out of this false solidarity and getting into more authentic solidarity	What aspect of that system have we incorporated into ourselves (start by examining the examiner)	What's missing is much more powerful question than what's wrong
make the strategy more widespread strategy in Africa	Replicable isn't about not changing - always have to be aware of the contexts where they work	we're all one human family and anything is possible	inherent respect and humility towards the people you serve	Clients, not beneficiaries. Serving them. That inherently gives them a choice
People choosing if they want to engage. Then them leading that engagement	brings the money, structure that helps communities organize in a way that is inclusive	Provides financing for communities to do their own projects	organize regular meetings - what they envision for themselves, then implementation	provides \$8000 grant no matter what the community decides
Need to have a consensus based decision making then finance what they decide	transitioned from implementing projects to partner and trainer to other organizations	working with the government is the best path to sustainable scale.	We want to change how these actors work together to put communities at the center	Social capital is very important - norms, networks, cooperations
risk-informed development	Resilience: absorptive, adaptive, transformative	double-loop learning	You never try to scale a rural project to work in an urban. Try to scale an outcome (more resilience energy, health)	Use the scaling framework that tells you what to do but in a way that's not linear
How do we create institutions that are resilient to shocks and stress in ways that don't collapse the system	How do you actually shift institutions and political sentiments and enable more regenerative design	Not just the work we're doing, but the structures of the organization	design with health vs outcomes in mind	How can we design this in a way that builds capacity at every stage of the journey?

METAPHOR

Climbing a mountain in the fog

You know where you want to go and you know that you don't know how to get there

Knowing that you don't know

Fighting an uphill battle

The acorn and the oak tree: inside every acorn is an oak tree

What it takes is nurturing and watering and planting it in the right conditions

Lots of ID work that hasn't seemed to work in the past, but something in it planted seeds or dropped the acorn

Big players NGOs who have set the stage - they're the oak trees

Generated ideas for a lot of acorns, people looking for what's missing and what they can contribute

Acorns are social enterprises and for profit sector, people who are socially-minded. Small charities

Everybody is extraordinary. Gift within them. Can drive them forward. Just need to know about the opportunities

It should be: ecosystem where different actors in the system support each other in their growth

All prospering together, supporting each other in that process. Not a competition

it's become a machine so big

they have no idea if that's contributing to a bigger outcome, or undermining something else

Chaos: the antithesis of a holistic - you have all these different players, operating in the same area

The duplication, no coordination

It's a big money making machine

Pump money into system, it does its humanitarian work

Like running on a hamster wheel covered in molasses

We're running so fast and trying so hard but barely moving an inch

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VISION

community associations exerting pressure on their governments

Goal for every person to know the guiding principles and own them and live by them

The only way out of oppression is a vibrant civil society

devoted to building up vibrant and autonomous rights defending organizations

Real democracy defended by committed civil society ensuring those with power are held to account

Nurturing all levels of understanding about the work. Want to make the forest bigger for everybody

To put ourselves out of business. To end hunger. Because we do believe it's possible

We want to lose our jobs. We believe in the next evolution of humanity so we're not afraid of it

Fully empowered to advocate to their own governments

Wellbeing of children and life in all its fullness

a world where everyone determined their future

our org is inherently about community - the belief that we should be forming a community as a world. We're in this together

Being able to choose your own future

Ideally this would merge into something that would sustain itself

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CHALLENGES

1.4% of oda goes to local grassroots organizations

every government has other priorities

relationships and power dynamics determines what the policies and practices are

the future is going to continue to be a struggle for human dignity against totalitarianism forever

The struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor will always be with us

Power imbalances in development. That's the balance we should have. Offering to support and letting people say no

Still a power imbalance coming in with money

path towards systems change and partnership mean you give up control over success

It's a lot of easier to say we're going to hit these targets, vs we're changing the conversation

More uncertain and dependent on others

gov change priorities and people, change attention, working with gov is slower and more complicated than if were to do it on our own

Race and social justice - who holds the power within organizations

How do we create a locally grown organization who can compete globally

balance between model (300 page doc) and mission

recognition of having power, but different from giving up power

Fear that you make less of a contribution. Just an organization that talks and doesn't do anything

community-driven development isn't well defined. Actors might say they do it because they talk to people, but need to be certain standards

Need to map out the system

we'd like to think we're equal partners, but the way we're set up this is a american ngo, hard to get to true equity

To make sure there's an ongoing relationship between citizens and governments

Sustainability is buzzword but no one really knows how to do it

Were those outcomes sustained for 2 - 3yrs after the project? We don't do evaluation after the program ends

Ex-post evaluations - not many that are done. The budgeting is not there

Literature scoping: nobody is clear on what is sustainability

How do get the government to function properly - that's where we get greater sustainability

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CHALLENGES

Term is self-reliance - but the richest countries aren't self-reliant

3 INGOs in one area working. They're all got overlapping messages

Undermining message to their community to advocate to governments

Vast bulk of money is through very highly paid technical advisor working for private firms on behalf of usaid and other countries

you're never really able to show that that's what you're doing
Wellbeing is very complex

We do too much - we're not known for anything specifically because we do everything

Specialization is growing in the NGO sector

The business reality is that INGOs are on a treadmill where they're reproducing. a lot of vested interest

Technology as platform should be replacing the INGOs as intermediary. INGOs aren't keeping up

INGOs are operating on old traditional business models. Unless they change they will die

Donor gives you predefined problem, now fix it, you put pre-fixed solution into proposal

linear log frame of how to do this in 2-3 years, contractually obligated to do this (same partners, metrics)

elites that are so powerful they take over the state

If there's a limitation - need to engage different partners - you can't change it. You can't reallocate funding

Usaid won't come up with this - so many collective action issues in this

It's very hard to know ahead of time what a given solution will be in diverse environments

Rubbing up against path dependence. Pump money into system, it does its humanitarian work

Blind spot on geopolitics playing a huge role. If you're an aid worker on the ground, you're not making these connections

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