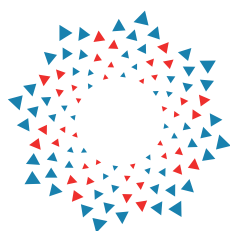# IMPROVING ORGANISATIONAL PROGRAMMING, CULTURE & PRACTICE

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Traditionally, change in the international development sector comes only at a snail's pace, due to the involvement of large monolithic actors such as governments, multilaterals and global finance institutions. Deeply entrenched practices, such as most important decisions being made in the Global North, have been critiqued as ineffective or disempowering for decades, and yet are still the norm. Instigating radical change may seem especially out of reach for smaller actors, like local community organisations that hold little conventional power in the system and are usually beholden to the agendas of larger institutions that hold the purse strings.

Since their inception, both international volunteering and international development have been based on the concept of charity, which inherently comes with an unequal power dynamic. Still today, in most organisations' external communications there is the notion of the "helper" and the "helped", the active "givers" and the passive "recipients", the idea that those offering charity are to be revered and those receiving it are to extend gratitude. These outdated notions are damaging to all involved. The givers are not incentivised to strive for effectiveness when the act of giving is itself celebrated. Beneficiaries are primed to internalise damaging neo-colonial narratives, and usually have little agency in what help they receive and how it is offered.

Acts of charity, no matter on what scale, are unlikely to create the kind of global change that many of us involved in this sector aspire to. The problems that we are aiming to tackle are structural in nature and global in scope, and sustainably addressing them involves challenging the very power dynamics, attitudes and systems that are entrenched within the aid sector. The need for organisational shift has been highlighted by recent movements and developments, such as Black Lives Matter, #AidToo, and the cataclysmic threat of climate change. Currently, the international development sector is not nimble enough to adequately respond to these challenges, and is instead becoming an increasingly anachronistic system that is modelled on and perpetuates many of the injustices that we claim to tackle.

So, how do we set about making these necessary, radical shifts that we have proposed?

Authentic change on an organisational level cannot be something imposed from the top down. It cannot be another agenda designed by the Global North, even if the intentions are to offer more power and agency to actors in the Global South, as this will result in the kind of tokenism and feel-goodism that is all too familiar in this sector. Meaningful change needs to come from the "bottom" up – along with truly questioning who is at the top and at the bottom in the first place. We should not just be seeking input from those meant to be benefitting, but asking for their direction and leadership. Instead of a fixed paradigm with predefined outcomes, we need a true handing-over of the reins.

This is, of course, difficult, especially for larger organisations with a wide and varied base. It isn't enough to launch another consultation that assumes a level playing field among respondents in terms of either power or understanding. In order to have the kind of honest and open discussions needed for organisational change, participants from all levels need to have a good grounding in the concepts and have shared mental models. There also needs to be an intentionally-created and tightly-held space for critical thinking and reimagining the status quo.

For example, an organisation committed to decolonising their practices cannot do so meaningfully without putting in a lot of groundwork. Not only is there a need to educate all stakeholders on key concepts, but also, and with infinitely more difficulty, there is a need to create more fluid power dynamics within institutions themselves.

At Alto we have been partnering with development and volunteering agencies seeking to make dramatic organisational culture shifts – for example, moving away from the tourism space and towards community development. This was also the context in which we created AltoLearn, an online learning platform for the "doing good" sector, which offers accessible courses introducing the current dilemmas and challenges in the field, designed by global experts and thought leaders. The aim is to curate space for cross-organisational conversations on difficult topics.

Of course, we do not imagine that individual organisations can create these kinds of shifts in a microcosm. The sector is still constrained and to some extent controlled by larger ecosystems of power. But as we have explored, the system is ripe for change. Put simply, the international voluntary sector cannot continue in the same way while still clinging to the moral high ground and upholding the narrative of "doing good". The world today is full of progressive discourse and nuanced critique that is pushing us to do better. Some brave and radical organisations need to step forward to shake up the sector and push us towards thinking and behaving differently.

The key questions when thinking about organisational change include:

— What neo-colonial assumptions or elements of the "charity" model of international volunteering underlie your own organisation's practice?

— What parts of your organisational programming, practice or culture do you think need to change, and what constraints are there?

— How do you aim to have these conversations within your organisation and with wider stakeholders?

— If we are talking about an authentic and radical shift, how much of your model is "on the table" to be redesigned and reimagined?