

Key points

Western development paradigms centred on market solutions, linear knowledge transfer and human superiority over nature, are contributing to the nature and climate crises and perpetuating colonial injustices.

Decolonisation includes promoting alternative nature-centred paradigms of Indigenous and local peoples and adopting an intersectional approach. But exactly what decolonisation means should be defined by those impacted by colonisation.

This briefing identifies the need to transfer decision-making power and funding to Indigenous and grassroots partners, centring their priorities, concepts, values and research systems through equitable partnerships, and dismantling colonial power structures.

Decolonisation requires fundamental organisational changes such as rethinking the identity of people in leadership positions, enabling programmatic decisions to be locally led, mainstreaming decolonisation principles and ensuring flexible donor funding.

Exploring decolonisation and its implications for IIED

In its strategy *Manifesto for a thriving world* (2024),¹ IIED affirms its commitment to becoming an anti-racist organisation and to pursuing decolonisation with care. This briefing highlights some important insights that informed the manifesto and that remain relevant for ongoing efforts by IIED and others pursuing decolonisation and equitable partnerships.² Specifically, it summarises eight key insights from a series of internal talks by Indigenous and grassroots partners, peer organisations and majority-world thinkers who provided feedback on how IIED can decolonise its research programmes and become anti-racist. The speakers identified the need to challenge mainstream development and environment paradigms and research agendas as White supremacist constructs; to co-create alternatives with Indigenous and grassroots partners; and to shift decision-making power and funding to the grassroots. Acting on these recommendations will require fundamental changes for IIED – and in the institutions, norms and mindsets that influence what we do.

The sustainable development sector carries complex legacies of colonial and racist power dynamics. During more than 50 years of collaborative action research with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America IIED has benefited from, and often perpetuated, a colonial model of aid and development. We have transferred values, concepts and partnership terms that reproduce colonial power dynamics and exclude different epistemologies – for example, by promoting Western development models and tech-finance-market fixes, prioritising Western research systems and knowledge (and reproducing this predominantly in English and European languages), and overlooking racial difference in our research and analysis.

Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, IIED established an internal Race and Racism Working Group in 2020 to steer a process to become an anti-racist organisation. The process

has involved several initiatives,³ including organising a series of internal talks by Indigenous and grassroots partners, majority-world thinkers⁴ and peer organisations on decolonising IIED research and partnerships.

Listening to majority-world partners and scholars

The Food for Thought discussion series, which ran from September 2021 to July 2023, aimed to deepen IIED's collective understanding of decolonisation and explore how to apply this to IIED's research and action. We invited speakers to reflect on what they thought decolonisation might mean for IIED, provide honest feedback and practical recommendations based on direct experience of working with IIED, and share decolonial research approaches, tools and methods.

“Local people are never asked to evaluate donors, which dehumanises us”

To avoid extractive knowledge models, we co-designed the sessions with local partners and used diverse formats. For example, Quechua communities livestreamed their presentations from the Potato Park biocultural territory in Peru,

enabling different community members to speak directly. Alais Ole-Morindat, a Maasai leader in Tanzania, facilitated a half-day workshop with pastoralist organisations and elders in

Arusha before the presentation to IIED, to help generate frank and detailed feedback.

To maximise staff engagement, the series was co-organised with all of IIED’s research groups, who were asked to propose and co-lead sessions.

The Food for Thought series highlighted the importance of decolonisation for achieving IIED’s vision of a fairer and more sustainable world, and provided valuable spaces for joint reflection and learning. IIED is grateful to all the speakers (see Box 2) and participants. The insights and recommendations for IIED are presented below.⁵

Insights and recommendations

1. Challenge dominant development and conservation models as colonial White supremacist constructs. As Alejandro Argumedo (Asociación ANDES, Peru) explained: “Colonialism imposed nation states, religion and then ‘development’ framed in a Euro-centric, White supremacist view. People in the ‘New World’ were seen as barbarians needing salvation by European Christians and this racist mentality has been internalised. The notions of development and growth based on Western (Adam Smith) economics are applied universally. But development is at the cost of nature, with man above other species rather than equal as in precolonial societies. And conservation started with land-grabbing from Indigenous Peoples to establish US national parks.”

Box 1. What is decolonisation?

Decolonisation has been defined as “an ongoing ethical and political project that seeks to analyse and rethink the world from the perspective of Indigenous and other colonised peoples, and disturb and reformulate the unequal power relations that characterise the ‘colonial present’ in post-colonial and settler societies”.¹⁰ Colonial injustices include racialised capitalism, extractivism, land dispossession, violence, genocide, forced displacement, slavery and related multigenerational trauma. Decolonisation is therefore a multifaceted process that requires, for example, dismantling economic power structures, redistributing land, reforming governance structures, recognising and re-centring marginalised Indigenous and precolonial knowledges, languages and institutions, and making reparations for past harms. Decolonisation also means recognising the right of countries and communities to self-determination, including their right to decide what decolonisation means for them, and standing in solidarity with their leadership.

Professor Sylvia Tamale (Makerere University, Uganda) stressed that “the world is living one big lie – that Western ways of thinking, being and doing are a one-size-fits-all model ... This is about the sustenance of capitalistic production for profit, underpinned by racist colonial narratives. Decades of colonial rule entrenched this big lie in structures and mechanisms that persist today; Western ideology penetrates all aspects of African lives. The theory of development – like other neoliberal concepts such as democracy and human rights – assumes that a modernist economy (measured in GDP) equals progress and the need to maximise markets and commodify social relations. This model has not worked in Africa.”

2. Recognise precolonial non-binary gender norms. Tamale explained that “binary understandings of gender in Africa are rooted in Victorian-era patriarchy and Judeo-Christianity, and linked to capitalist binary categories – for example, productive versus unproductive, waged versus unwaged – creating further gender hierarchies. African understandings of gender are fundamentally different, often flexible, and non-binary. For example, those of the Kikuyu people of Kenya, Nubia of Sudan and Indigenous people of Madagascar, South Africa and Uganda.”

3. Promote alternative development models to address global crises – ecological, socioeconomic, political, cultural and personal. Ashish Kothari (Kalpavriksh, India and Global Tapestry of Alternatives) explained that “this requires systemic transformation through: a) community resistance and social movements that challenge modern development models and false or partial solutions founded on techno-fixes and market mechanisms like ‘green growth’, ‘net zero’ and ‘sustainable development’; and b) promotion of alternative development paradigms that exist across the world in ancient worldviews and wellbeing concepts such as *sumaq kawsay* (*buena vida*) (Andes), *suma qamaña* (Bolivia), *ubuntu* (South Africa), *umuntu* (Uganda), *ukama* (Zimbabwe), *eti uwem* (West Africa) and *swaraj* and *eco-swaraj* (India), and in new concepts such as degrowth, solidarity economy, climate justice and food sovereignty.” Kothari pointed to thousands of examples, including work to restore Indigenous food systems by the Deccan Development Society and dalit women in Andhra Pradesh (India), the Potato Park biocultural territory in Cusco (Peru), Territories of Life conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women’s movements, and village federations resisting mining and asserting rights in India. These locally led alternatives can be scaled through common principles such as pluralism, self-reliance, self-governance, collectivity and rights of nature).

4. Support Indigenous research systems and decolonise methodologies. As Argumedo observed: “Colonial ‘truths’ are perpetuated through research and education. English and Spanish naming has extinguished Indigenous taxonomies that reflect local understanding of the environment.”

By contrast, the concept of biocultural heritage (which has guided IIED’s work on traditional knowledge since 2005) “reflects Indigenous ways of knowing centred on the interconnectedness of phenomena, which have been overlooked by Western science. It expresses the relationship between people and nature mediated by rules such as reciprocity.” For example, “Quechua research balances the human, wild and sacred worlds — or *ayllus* — to achieve wellbeing,” noted Argumedo. Community members of the Potato Park, a Quechua territory of 9,200 hectares, explained: “We conduct research through daily farming and observing biological indicators and sacred mountains, and through systematic altitudinal transects to monitor climate impacts on potatoes. Decolonisation means having the right to determine the objectives of research on our territory, the methods, who does the research and to shape all decisions.”

Others noted that mainstream research methodologies follow certain rules and the results are published in writing: “Northern scholars and scientists often don’t recognise the importance of traditional knowledge and treat African colleagues as information providers rather than theory makers,” reflected Tamale. Zoha Shawoo (Stockholm Environment Institute — SEI) observed that in climate research “power imbalances manifest in inadequate Indigenous voices, acknowledgement or co-authorship, and Western knowledge bias in research design and priorities”.

5. Recognise coloniality in the ‘Indigenous’ label in Africa. Dr Chimere Diaw (African Model Forests Network) and Phil René Oyono (Rights and Resources Initiative, Cameroon, Congo) explained that the ‘Indigenous’ label came from colonial administrations, and more recently the international community, to denote those who are not settled, such as pastoralists and hunter-gatherers. While convenient for international donors and conservation NGOs, Diaw noted that “the meaning of ‘Indigenous’ is not settled yet amongst Africans and limits what Africans are — which is plural”. According to Mordecai Ogada (Conservation Solutions Afrika, Kenya) its use “has caused fractures by prioritising one group over another, linked to White saviour complex”. The speakers noted that in Africa all people are Indigenous, but Bantu people who are settled have a different relationship with natural

resources than mobile peoples. On the other hand, Joseph Ole Simel (Mainyoito Pastoralists Integrated Development Organization, Kenya) noted that the Indigeneity label and African Union resolutions on human and peoples’ rights have helped pastoralists and Indigenous Peoples to assert themselves politically and advance their rights, for example in Kenya and the Congo.

6. Decolonise partnerships and shift power. Patience Mudimu (SDI Zimbabwe) observed that international organisations hold a lot of power as intermediaries and funders, and there are also power differences within federations like SDI. Argumedo noted that White supremacy and racism are still embedded in many White-dominated research organisations and recommended reconsidering partnerships with such organisations that are not attempting to reform.

Several speakers stressed the need to shift decision-making power and funding to Indigenous and grassroots organisations, to actively engage local communities in decision making (Sarah Nandudu, SDI Uganda) and to give responsibility to local partners (Anna Cadiz-Hadeed, Caribbean Natural Resources Institute — CANARI). However, according to Shawoo, local engagement is often constrained by short proposal timeframes: “Decolonisation means shifting power throughout the project cycle — from identifying appropriate funders or calls that enable community co-design, to dissemination and evaluation.” Zeenat Niazi (Development Alternatives) highlighted the need to diversify donors and influence donor priorities and modalities to engage target communities more deeply, noting also the role that IIED has played in facilitating conversations with donors through coalitions like the Green Economy Coalition.

7. Respect local knowledge and ensure two-way accountability and allyship. Feedback from pastoralist organisations in Arusha, shared by Maasai leader Ole-Morindat, explained how international organisations sideline the knowledge, experience and voices of pastoralists: “Most organisations have not spent enough time listening to local people, which suggests a lack of respect for local values, knowledge and worldviews — such as the Maasai philosophy of being, becoming and belonging. They bring their own, Westernised strategic plans and there is an imposition of ideas. Evaluation terms of references and questions are defined externally and only focus on change that makes sense to donors. Local people are never asked to evaluate donors, which dehumanises us. Contracts use colonial languages and are not very polite given our culture and values — as Maasai, we believe our way of being is of more value to humanity than money.”

Box 2. Food for Thought speakers

Alais Ole-Morindat,
Maasai leader, Tanzania

Alejandro Argumedo,
Asociación ANDES,
Peru

Anna Cadiz-Hadeed,
CANARI

Ashish Kothari,
Kalpavriksh India and
Global Tapestry of
Alternatives

Chimere Diaw, African
Model Forests Network

Joseph Ole Simel,
Mainyoito Pastoralists
Integrated Development
Organization, Kenya

Mordecai Ogada,
Conservation Solutions
Afrika, Kenya

Patience Mudimu, SDI
Zimbabwe

Phil René Oyono,
Rights & Resources
Initiative, Cameroon,
Congo

Potato Park
community members

Sarah Nandudu, SDI
Uganda

Sylvia Tamale,
Makerere University,
Uganda

Zeenat Niazi,
Development Alternatives

Zoha Shawoo, SEI

Ole-Morindat highlighted many positive aspects of working with IIED, including treating partners with professionalism and respect, providing resources to strengthen institutions and “capacity development to argue with policymakers”. However, he also observed that IIED sometimes adopts a colonial mentality, lacks flexibility to address local needs that arise (due to donor rules), can be “very choosy” when selecting thematic priorities, does not reproduce enough outputs in local languages and is not vocal about injustices such as pastoralist evictions.

8. Support concepts and networks from the ground to shift power.

According to Argumedo, by engaging with the Potato Park and focusing on Quechua concepts like *sumaq kawsay* (*buen vivir*), IIED has helped to change the dynamics of social and racial conversations. “By associating with the Potato Park, a structure created by Quechua communities, IIED recognised that Indigenous knowledge, customary laws and institutions are valid, and that communities can create valid evidence. This has enhanced the park’s relational sovereignty and shifted White gaze.” IIED’s support in the creation of ground-up concepts and networks, like biocultural heritage and the International Network of Mountain Indigenous Peoples, has also shifted power within the partnership itself. “IIED should recognise Indigenous Peoples’ core values, prioritise the agendas of communities that live in harmony with Mother Earth and use these to influence international organisations which often pursue very different paradigms.”

Reflections and next steps

The lessons and recommendations surfaced through the Food for Thought series helped inform IIED’s manifesto and our ongoing work to enable more equitable partnerships.² Our manifesto commits to actively challenging Western development and environment constructs, embracing different epistemologies, and embedding anti-racism and equitable partnerships in our work.

Making this a reality across IIED’s work will not be easy. The Food for Thought series engaged an active sub-group of IIED staff, but awareness of and commitment to decolonisation remains patchy among staff and leadership. And, more

fundamentally, decolonisation is incompatible with the Western development paradigm in which IIED currently operates. IIED will need to profoundly reshape its work, for example by moving away from projects that prioritise Western market mechanisms over Indigenous development models and self-determination, or that promote concepts and knowledge generated in the West in post-colonial contexts. This requires longer-term reflection, assessment and transformation internally, and further exploring the legal, governance and funding context that shapes IIED and impedes decolonisation.

There is much existing work on which IIED can build, including a 2022 study exploring anti-racist development narratives⁶ and long-standing decolonial work on Indigenous biocultural heritage and pastoralism.⁷ We can engage funders in discussions on flexible, locally led funding models through our work to promote equitable partnerships,² and we can promote new bottom-up modalities for locally led adaptation and climate resilience.⁸ Key steps towards embedding decolonisation include:⁹

- Co-creating a decolonisation strategy with majority world, Indigenous and grassroots partners and elaborating a position statement
- Supporting Indigenous and grassroots organisations to co-create alternative development models that IIED and others can support
- Rethinking the identity of people in IIED leadership and governance positions
- De-centring IIED and transferring leadership and funding to local partners, communities and affected peoples
- Embedding decolonisation, intersectional justice and equitable partnership principles, and developing new radical partnerships that seek to dismantle colonial power structures
- Strengthening partnerships with Indigenous, local and grassroots organisations, and establishing systems for their meaningful participation in decision making, and
- Using our voice and influence to challenge aspects of international development that reinforce colonial norms, including funders.

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Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development’s (IIED) mission is to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence in partnership with others.

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FIND OUT MORE

Find out more about our work on decolonisation at www.iied.org/race-racism-anti-racism

Notes

¹ IIED (2024) *Manifesto for a thriving world: IIED’s connected ambition, 2024 and beyond*. IIED, London. / ² Wong-Pérez, KJ, Kajumba, T, Swiderska, K, Mardon, M, Nicolini, G, Nakyeeyune, A and Bigg, T (2024) *Towards equitable partnerships: addressing barriers and enabling equity among unequal partners*. IIED, London. / ³ Including a review of how racism places out in the narratives it writes and publishes and commissioning an independent race and racism audit of its internal policies, practices and staff experiences. See: Mitchell, T (2024) *Becoming an anti-racist organisation: what we’ve learnt so far*, IIED, 3 July. / ⁴ ‘Majority world’ means countries and territories variously referred to as ‘developing countries’, ‘emerging markets’, ‘global south’ or ‘low- and middle-income countries’, which are outside the Western world and make up the majority of the global population. / ⁵ Quotes are taken from speaker presentations, speaker notes and attendee notes. / ⁶ Lartey, N and Beauchamp, E (2022) *Discomfort to discovery: exploring racism and anti-racism in development narratives*. IIED, London. / ⁷ For more information, see: www.bioculturalheritage.org and www.iied.org/drylands-pastoralism / ⁸ An example of this is evident in the LDC Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR). See: www.iied.org/supporting-ldc-initiative-for-effective-adaptation-resilience-life-ar / ⁹ Many of these recommendations are taken from an internal report produced to help inform IIED’s strategic direction: Andrachuk, M and Hill, L (2024) *Cross-cutting proposition: decolonisation and intersectionality*. Proposition Stewards series. Unpublished. / ¹⁰ Johnson, DE, Parsons, M and Fisher, K (2021) *Indigenous climate change adaptation: new directions for emerging scholarship*. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 5(3), pp.1,541–1,578.

