

Transcript: *A pathway towards feminist global collaboration: An Introduction*

Samie Blasingame: Our Voices, Our Choices, the feminist podcast from the Heinrich Böll Foundation

Shristee Bajpai: What development brings is maybe livelihood and economic transformation, but it is really violating the whole ecology, the whole social, the whole political dimensions of life.

Aram Ziai: Current debates about a feminist development policy or decolonial development policy can be very worthwhile and useful endeavours, very progressive endeavours. It depends on what type of feminism, what type of decolonization are we talking about?

Saranel Benjamin: [...] and that's why it became increasingly important to start bringing to the fore, this work on racial justice alongside decolonization because not only was it necessary to decolonize our external practice, but it became also increasingly important to start to decolonize the internal narrative that was shaping a lot of the work in all of these organisations.

[Intro]

Samie Blasingame: Welcome to a new, five-part series on Feminist Development Policy called: A pathway towards feminist global collaboration.

This new series seeks to contribute to the current debate on feminist development and foreign policy in Germany by building and strengthening feminist visions and alternatives to what is commonly understood as “international development”

I'm your host, Samie Blasingame, and I will be guiding you over the course of five episodes as we explore how feminist approaches can challenge the current development narrative and pave the way towards a collaborative and solidarity-based practice rooted in gender, racial, environmental and economic justice.

Considering the many social and environmental challenges we are facing globally, namely the increase of natural disasters and other impacts of the climate crisis such as lack of safe and legal migration policies, the growing gap in wealth disparities within over-resourced societies and between poorer and wealthier ones, as well as the dismantlement of human rights achievements for both women, non-binary people and the LGBTIQ+ community, or indigenous communities losing access to their lands and thus their livelihoods, it is critical that we reflect on our methods of global interaction and the underlying ideas that drive them in order to put alternative modes of collaboration and leadership into practice.

So, on behalf of an emerging network of practitioners aiming to re-think development policy from a feminist perspective, FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders, a feminist non-profit initiative to advance gender equity in the non-profit world, and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, I invite you to listen along as we re-think, reflect and learn with and from people from the LGBTIQ+ community, Black,

Brown, and Indigenous communities, and grassroots activists in the Global South - people whose voices have long been excluded and marginalised in the development sector.

Each episode will be accompanied by a set of recommendations for development practitioners and decision makers, both in English and German. With this framework, we hope to widen the scope of our impact beyond the broadcasting of this podcast, and share practical and achievable steps forward, with which each individual actor and every one of you listening can support a process of transformation within current institutions and organisations – both in the development sector and beyond. You will be able to find these recommendations on the Heinrich Böll website, as well on the FAIR SHARE homepage. We will include links to both in the show notes.

So, for this episode, to kick things off and make sure we're all on the same page, we spoke with three people who, for many years, have been grappling with critical questions concerning international development both in theory and practice

The first person we spoke with was Shristee Bajpai, an activist researcher based in Mumbai, who shared some thoughts on the consequences of development programmes as they currently stand

Shristee Bajpai: So the kind of a development project, at least, um, borrowed from the West, um, that we see also here in South Asia, India, is that this idea that we have to have development at all costs. Um, be it human cost, be it nature cost, be it... livelihoods cost,-and this conception of what is development is, is never people's conception of development. People who have power decide what is development for, for a large number of people.

And so the current form of a development, uh, which is based on extractivism, which is based on, um, taking away people's land, um, um, also extremely unjust in many ways to certain castes, to certain genders. And we know that many of environmental defenders, human right defenders who have fought against this kind of a development have also faced, um, existential threats. They have been killed. They have been repressed they have been put in jail.

So in very clear terms, we see this clash of worldview, where there is one group of people who feel what is development for a certain group of people. And there, then there's another group of people who say, we don't want this kind of thing to be pushed upon.

Samie Blasingame: One example of this that Shristee shared was from Rabuti, India, about thirty years ago, when an indigenous community called the Adivasi organised to resist a dam project

Shristee Bajpai: Now the reason behind that dam protest was that, um, they didn't want their mother, which is which they considered the river in Rabuti as their mother to be damaged or diverted. Whereas people who were proposing the dams, were giving them various lucrative offers saying that you'll get the jobs, you'll get livelihoods and we will give you lands where you can go and live, but just leave this region and let the river go dam and we'll compensate you adequately. So their vision of development, which right after India's independence in 1947, was that dams are the temples of modern India.

With that one gets a sense of that development is violent because it displaces all these people from their lands, from their homes. Um, it displaces the species who are living in that river. It, it, uh, it

really kills the right of the river to flow freely. So that's why I call it violent. It is violence against peoples. It is a violence against the rest of nature.

When we are talking about things like development and policy we kind of forget that it is about people and people's lives and, uh, really about their everyday lives and everyday struggles.

Samie Blasingame: Indeed, for many years the narratives, policies and projects created and implemented under the framework of development have been criticised by activists, practitioners and scholars such as Gustavo Esteva, Uma Kothari, Mariá Lugones, as well as many others who have been on the receiving end of such endeavours as being too technical, often eurocentric and ultimately ineffective in influencing change on an institutional level

As an expert on developmental critique, Professor Dr. Aram Ziai, who leads the department of Development Policy and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kassel, was able to illustrate some of the core problems related to the concept of international development, namely the power imbalances that underpin and perpetuate them

Aram Ziai: If development is actually.....something linked to a good society to improvement in progress, et cetera. um, then who is legitimately defining how it is.

Actually, to talk about developed and less developed, societies is already, um, an exertion of power is already defining a universal scale and defining your own society standing at the top of it. The very standards, according to which this field is structured already have this Eurocentric bias, which ultimately derives from the colonial idea that our society is. Um, the ideal is the norm and other societies, which are different, are not merely different, but they are backward. They are deficient.

I think it is important to think about it because this discourse of development is the, the primary means by which we imagine the South from the perspective of the North and the relation between North and South. We imagine it in terms of development, in terms of a universal scale where some are more progressed and others are lagging behind.

Samie Blasingame: As Dr. Ziai went on to explain, development as a concept and practice originated in the middle of the 20th century, spurred by cold war fears of anti-colonial socialist movements growing in the newly independent countries of the Global South. At the time, the Truman presidency in the United States saw the containment of communism as its prime imperative and so the artificial division of global society as either “developed” or “underdeveloped” became its solution to maintain US hegemony, culturally and politically. New technologies were to be transferred to the underdeveloped countries so that they could advance and aspire to a US American ideal, ultimately hindering alternative visions of what else life could be

Aram Ziai: So and this was the onset of what could be called anticolonial imperialism of the US. So, the endeavor to maintain and gain access to the resources of the Global South, to the markets of the Global South. So the basic idea was, um, poverty reduction and doing business in the South are not mutually exclusive. They can be combined. And this is the basic thinking, which still underlies. most, um, attempts of official development policy. And this is empirically, um, well, questionable. So the idea that poverty can be defeated within global capitalism through mechanisms of the market. And this has had, um, fatal consequences

Samie Blasingame: Acknowledging this sordid history of development practice, and its inability to bring about global equity to the degree it promised, the new coalition government in Germany is now seeking to apply Feminist approaches to different policy areas, starting with a Feminist Foreign Policy that was agreed to in the coalition contract. To the surprise of many, the Development Ministry, BMZ, now aims to follow this example by declaring its ambition towards a Feminist Development Policy and is currently in a process of defining its strategy.

Which is why it is so important to acknowledge the danger of certain phrases or perspectives entering into the mainstream narrative when they are actually void of meaning. For example participatory development, localisation, or empowerment - that have been championed in the sector throughout the years, but what happens when organisations appropriate these terms without truly integrating their meanings into practice?

This is something Saranel Benjamin, Head of Partnerships at Oxfam Great Britain, has experienced first-hand - both as an anti-apartheid activist from South Africa and now being based in the Global North, in one of the largest International NGOs.

Saranel Benjamin: The first main thing happens is, uh, that you turn, you turn these concepts into, uh, rhetoric. Um, they become completely depoliticized, neutralized, and they become, you know, nice to have things that are printed out on A3 paper and stuck on walls as, you know, principles to follow.

And so there's a tendency to say, oh, well, we've got these principles now, feminist principles. We're a very progressive organisation 'cause we've got them. So in the spaces of policy, for example, in the spaces of strategy, in the spaces of, um, even looking at our practice and our systems, you don't get feminist principles showing up in there - or even racial justice and decolonization they're, you know, they're all part of it together.

So for example, when I came into, into Oxfam, uh, there were, there was a proud proudness or pride, uh, taken as to the, as to how diverse they were. But when you look, when you actually look at the data, Black and people of colour only made up 12% of the organisation so their issue around diversity was that they had managed to get in more women into the organisation, and when you look a little bit closer, it was actually white woman. Um, so, you know, very proudly saying we have more, more women leaders than ever before. And then when you look closely, it's the, the only Black or woman of colour that are there is myself and maybe one other person.

Samie Blasingame: Saranel's experience in the sector spans over 25 years, and her work has often incorporated many of the social justice concepts that have been popularised yet misappropriated by well-meaning practitioners in the field.

Saranel Benjamin: I remember first talking about decolonization about three years ago. Uh, and for a moment, you know, people reacted like, oh, what is that? That she's talking about? Slight bit of fear, but then it became easy. And I was wondering, why was it becoming easy for my peers in the organisation? When I'm talking about something that's very, very radical at the heart of it, because we are talking about disrupting white power essentially. And who's controlling that power. So why is it becoming, why is it so easy? And there's a tendency in international development to make

everything technical, so transforming really radical, transformative political agendas into checklists, toolkits, uh, roadmaps to start with and you've completely neutralized it. You've sucked all the politics out and you're basically left with something that's gonna be used as a tool that is largely instrumentalized. You've instrumentalized decolonization and racial justice.

That's not what decolonization is about. If done right with the racial justice framework, it does have a radical transformative agenda that is seeking for the self-determination and autonomy of those in the global south.

Samie Blasingame: We will talk more about what it will take to avoid treating decolonization as a checklist later in this episode and throughout the series, but first, let's hear again from Professor Dr. Aram Ziai, who is also concerned about the development sector prioritising what he calls “window dressing” instead of systemic transformations such as a critique or a reimagination of global capitalism

Aram Ziai: From the perspective of post-colonial, decolonial perspectives we could ask. Okay, is it also a question of decolonizing the global economy? So in how far do colonial structures in the international division of labour, in trade policy, how far are they also affected of such a feminist or decolonial development policy? and if this is not the case, then, um, yeah, then I'm a bit worried that, that we're again, talking about window dressing, then, then feminist development policy or decolonial development policy, um, would be again, um, parts of what I call the, the cycle of development.

So which exists since the middle of the 20th century and with starts with a diagnosis of a deficit: oh, the South is poor. Oh, but we can help them with economic growth. With technological progress they will become developed. This is the promise of development and this promise is being reiterated again and again, since the end of the 1960s with ever new recipes. So the latest recipe then could be feminist development policy.

However, what is not being touched upon is, um, the mechanism which produces global inequality. And this is capitalism. And if this is not being taken serious, then, um, yeah. Then, then I think, um, we're talking about a fig leaf, um, which, which should then, um, cover up the massive transfer of resources, which goes from the poor countries to the rich countries and this transfer of resources amounts currently to roughly a net transfer of 1.000 billion US dollars per year

Samie Blasingame: And behind the curtain of this massive transfer of wealth, the narrative around participation and empowerment has gained significant traction - leaving many with the impression that development is something co-created by various actors to the benefit of the most vulnerable and historically marginalised. Unfortunately, this is seldom true and to provide a bit more context, Dr. Ziai shared an aspect of international development structures that can explain why programs committed to popular buzzwords often struggle to evolve past a certain point

Aram Ziai: So participation and ownership and empowerment is actually nothing radically new. The point is that it always encounters limits and these limits then are reached when the donor actually says, yeah, but still we want to control what is being done with the money, because we have a responsibility towards our taxpayers. You reach the limits of participation or the limits of ownership or of empowerment because the donor then insists of controlling what is being done with

the money. Yeah, and I think this is where we encounter also global structures, not only of capitalism, but also of a nation state system, which sees the role of politicians as the defence of interests of their constituency, the people in Germany, the Germans, um, vis a vis, um, the interests of other people in the world. And, um, in, and with this kind of policy you will not defeat global inequality. You will be. Yeah. You will always be defending the interest of the privileged, of the rich

Samie Blasingame: Indeed, a dominant paradigm in international development sees the creation of development programmes tied to the benefits they will bring to the country of origin, rather than seeking increased global wellbeing in general – for example, the elimination of global poverty in order to avoid war and continued flows of migration to Europe - but as Dr. Ziai explains, we need to overcome this type of thinking and instead seek a cosmopolitanism that is serious about global citizenship, otherwise we risk remaining within the parameters of global capitalism on the one hand and nation states on the other.

Dr. Ziai shared that, although short lived, there was once an approach applied by the BMZ that sought to shift global power structures, and that a new law in Germany also aims to acknowledge global interconnectedness and correct unjust dependencies, and therefore could be seen as a step in the right direction for the country's implementation of its feminist endeavour.

Aram Ziai: The red, green, German government with Wieczorek-Zeul, 1998 to 2005, actually attempted to change global structures for, um, for the benefit of the marginalised population in the world.

And, and this I think was a really, was with a great approach, which was then, um, very difficult to implement, because of precisely these limits, because when the minister of Wieczorek-Zeul actually said, okay, look, we need to change global structure so that the marginalised population in the Global South will benefit more from the global economy, her colleagues in the ministry of agriculture and in the ministry of the economy said, what are you? Are you mad? We're supposed to represent the interest of the German industry and you were telling us not to do our job? And so already within the government, at that stage, there were severe conflicts and the attempt then to change these global structures in the interest of the global poor was defeated at the outset and achieved only small successes.

One could say that the value chain law, the Lieferkettengesetz, is actually a step in this direction. Yeah, and here also the industrial lobby has managed to water down some of the more progressive elements, but this is precisely what it's about. This would be a step towards a global structural policy. If we managed to pursue this direction, that the global economy would be changed in such a way, that responsibility for, yeah, for our production and our consumption, would be improved on a global level.

Samie Blasingame: This value - or supply chain law is one of the ways Europe is seeking to ensure human rights are embedded in its supply chain system. It aims to curb the business as usual practices of European companies that prioritise profit over people and planet. Laws like this can help address the capitalist and extractive structures that maintain global power imbalances, but what about dismantling our understandings of what it means to quote unquote “develop” – what it means to help others achieve a so-called “good life”?

Shristee shares an example from her work in a community that risks losing their current lifestyles due to a mining project in their region:

Shristee Bajpai: So for example, I asked this, um, woman living in one of the communities struggling against a mining project. And I asked her, what is. What is a good life? What is a wellbeing for you? Uh, how would you define it? She said our life is good only. I mean, we have fresh water. Um, we have fresh air. It's not as polluted as where you live. Um, we grow our own food. Um, we have our community, we celebrate, we dance. That's that's good life for me. And of course this mining that is happening is. Basically going to destroy all this. Um, and we don't want it. We don't want our waters to be ruined. We don't want our forest to go and we want to have this life. And that's when one understands that wellbeing or development is so much more than just, um, bringing a road. Of course they say that they need road, but they don't need four lane highways. They just need a road to access maybe a hospital. They need basic education, but not something that, um, eliminates their own sense of identity. Um, something that is more relatable that is grounded in their own ecology of the place.

Samie Blasingame: So, with this background and understanding of the ideas and limitations that have been perpetuated in the international development sector over the years, the question remains, how a feminist perspective could interrupt this dynamic and help us think differently about development -- but first, what exactly is a feminist perspective in this context?

Shristee Bajpai: It's difficult to say what a Feminist perspective is because there's just so many perspectives, and I guess that's the work of alternatives of bringing in a lot of, a pluriverse of ideas and articulations of what it really means to change.

But I think what is essential is that how do we bring in those important voices in the conversations as much as we can and then various visions and perspectives emerge.

What it might look in development policy is changing the way our economy is. You learn from, um, from the women here in central India that economy cannot be something that is just based on profits. Economy has to be based on economy of share and care, of localized economy, of respecting rights of nature, respecting the other species in the forest. So in very concrete terms, I think that's what emerges from people's struggles, women's struggles in protecting their territories, which can inform the development aid policy.

It's also about the way we organize our own gatherings and meetings. It's also a sense of, you know, just changing the inner discourse of things. How do we talk about things that affect us about everyday life? Not too task oriented, but rather process oriented. I think these are very, very, sometimes often ignored, but extremely important for network building for space building because they really affect us. If we don't talk about our feelings and traumas and spaces and gatherings we belong to, we tend to ignore them.

Samie Blasingame: In fact, the whole concept of global *collaboration*, as opposed to *cooperation*, as we are aiming to outline in this series, is rooted in a commitment to bringing a variety of voices and perspectives into the conversation and then prioritizing the new visions that emerge from it. And as Shristee has just pointed out, there is a range of interpretations as to what feminism is and what it

looks like in practice – something Saranel has also experienced in her transition from doing this work in the Global South versus now, in the Global North

Saranel Benjamin: I had my own understanding of what feminist development policy or politics was in South Africa and when I came to the UK and, uh, I started to engage with, um, predominantly majority white, uh, Northern based INGOs, their understanding of feminism and feminist principles was very different to our understanding in the Global South.

Coming from South Africa, we had one very strong understanding of what feminism meant, and it had, you know, it strongly centred Black and woman of colour. So the feminism that I saw emerging in these spaces in the Northern, Northern INGO space was white feminism. It was not Black feminism. You know, we never articulated our work as being, as gaining parity, with men. It always went so much further than that. And I think that maybe that is because our feminism came from the apartheid struggle.

You know, feminist principles was for the whole organisation. It was something that was internal. It was about the way in which we related to each other as people. It was more values than an actual political struggle.

Samie Blasingame: Widening the scope of what such terms mean and how they should be applied in practice has been an ongoing challenge for Saranel over the years.

Saranel Benjamin: When I came into Oxfam GB, again, intersectionality was not mentioned in feminist principles. Everything was intersecting except race. Uh, so you know, it was geography, geographical location, education, um, you know, economic status, et cetera, disability, but nothing on race.

And having to kind of bring race into the centre of feminist principles was a huge, huge struggle, and so it started to coincide with our work on decolonization and racial justice that we started to hammer home quite strongly, that there was a need for intersectionality to be at the centre of everything that we were doing and now we're at the point where we are taking an intersectional approach to our gender justice and women's rights programming, which wasn't there before.

Samie Blasingame: Intersectionality stems from Black Feminist thought and was articulated as a concept by Professor Kimberlee Crenshaw in 1989. It is meant to help visualize the multiple oppressions an individual may face in a world shaped by race, gender, class and other social categorizations, which are all interconnected and often overlap to create interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage. Recognizing that one's multiple identities define how they are seen, treated, and therefore experience the world is key toward achieving more global equity. That's why an intersectional feminist approach is central to our endeavours toward global collaboration.

Saranel Benjamin: So the reason why intersectionality is important is because it goes, it forces us to place at the centre of our analysis the issue of race and the experiences specifically of Black and woman - Black, Indigenous, and women of colour - for whom we sit in the north and design programs for. If you don't take an intersectional approach to this, firstly, we don't include the voices of Black, Indigenous and women of colour at the centre of it. We don't include their experiences. And we begin to design solutions based on what we think as people based in the North, think is

appropriate for those. And as a result of that, we completely miss these intersecting and multi-layered experiences of oppression that Black Indigenous and women of colour experience.

Samie Blasingame: And so this concept of feminist global collaboration that we will continue to explore in this series must include an intersectional approach - one that produces autonomy and self-determination for all involved and allows for the space and time needed to reach a consensus that respects the needs and desires of those most affected.

Saranel Benjamin: How brilliant would it be if, uh, if we had, um, people in the Global North, just stepping aside, uh, and letting. Black and woman of colour. And when, I mean, you know, woman I'm including trans people as well in this, how brilliant would it be? If we, you know, we just got out of the way and just centred Black, Indigenous women and trans people at the heart of what we do? It sounds simple, but International development has a long way to go before it can actually start to relinquish that colonial control and, and distrust that exists between the Global North and the Global South.

It's, not geared towards self-determination and autonomy of the Global South at all. Um, and when I'm talking about Global South, I'm talking about Black and woman of colour, Indigenous women of colour and trans people in who are also living in the global north, um, what a different world this would look like, but we're not there yet.

[Outro]

Samie Blasingame: As our incredible guests have shown, the question of bringing feminist values to what we call 'international development' is not about adding on something - it's about completely deconstructing the assumptions that drive business-as-usual and transforming the structures that shape development in their current state.

If this sounds like a lot of work, you're right! But that's why we're here - to explore and iron out what such a vision could look like and get really concrete about what realising that vision would entail.

Some initial steps include:

- Questioning and analysing the structures we've built in the Global North and where they are perpetuating colonialism, racism, the patriarchy, and unjust economic structures
- Involving grassroots organisations and community organisers in the Global South directly in decision-making processes towards a new collaboration model
- and also, shifting financial resources directly to local feminist organisations

In upcoming episodes, we will be discussing topics like the power of knowledge and progressive funding methods, as well as diving deeper into what intersectionality can look like for the sector. We encourage all of you listening to embrace and reflect on any discomfort that may arise as we discuss these topics and explore how they intersect with concepts such as sexism, racism, colonialism, and white privilege; and to work through that discomfort to ultimately understand the impact of certain actions, even when our intentions are pure.

Don't forget that with each episode we will be publishing recommendations which we hope can help you and your colleagues take practical steps towards feminist global collaborations. You can find those at www.fairsharewl.org or www.boell.de! You can also follow us on LinkedIn or Twitter @fair_wl and @boell_gender

We would like to end each episode with a quote by an activist, scholar or practitioner. Today, that's with a wonderful quote from Gustavo Esteva:

On that day two billion people became underdeveloped. From that time on they ceased being what they were in all their diversity and were transformed into an inverted mirror of another's reality: a mirror that belittles them and sends them to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in the terms of a homogenising and narrow minority.

This has been a podcast of „Our Voices, Our Choices“ in the series “A pathway towards feminist global collaboration”. You can find this and other episodes on soundcloud, apple podcasts, spotify or in the app of your choice. Help us spread the word by rating us or recommending us to others. You can also send us feedback and suggestions at podcast@boell.de

Audio for this podcast was produced by Gretch and directed by me, your host, Samie Blasingame. Thanks so much for listening and see you here next time!