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Development or Destruction!

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Dear Friends,

The topic of so call "Decolonizing Development Cooperation", from my understanding it is a lullaby for indigenous people living in watershed forest landscapes in Mekong Countries

I use the term 'lullaby' in the sense of a sweet song that parents sing to their children to help them go to sleep. What I am implying is that the idea of 'decolonizing development cooperation' is a sweet song sung by Western development agencies to make their development partners in the Global South fall asleep, and of course, this is not what decolonization should be, so what is decolonization from our point of view?!

Colonisation and the Decolonizing Development Co-operation

Before we talk about 'decolonisation' we have to define what colonization is.

Colonization is the violent processes of one country taking over the country of another people and using it as a source for raw materials for the development of their own economy. It can be summed up as 'the violent appropriation of another people's land and labour'.

How is this justified?

It is said to be a 'civilizing' process, based on the idea that **the colonizer's way of life is superior** to that of **the colonized**, and that the colonized will benefit from being brought up to the same standard of civilization as their colonizers. But the process of 'civilization' is never meant to go too far. **The colonizers** do not want their indigenous subjects to think that they are equal to them, otherwise they may get the idea that they should rule themselves. To prevent this from happening, racial theories were invented that taught that indigenous peoples were incapable of ruling themselves.

Colonization, then was a combination of military violence, theft, political domination, and psychological oppression supported by ideas of cultural and racial superiority.

What then of 'decolonization'?

The VENRO Report of 2022 suggests that decolonization is the active **reversal** of colonization. This would mean colonized people re-gaining their independence and self-respect. For development agencies who are part of the former colonizing state this would mean the reversal of all relationships of domination, exploitation and superiority and working as equal

partners *for* the indigenous people in their former colonies, rather than having them work for them.

But this is never the case. Indigenous NGOs always seem to be working for their overseas funding agencies, following their directions, and complying with their criteria for Item Driven Project Approval!?

How is this continuation of colonization justified?

It is justified by the ideology of ‘development’.

‘Development’ in today’s world of global capitalism means the expansion of capitalist relations of production to every corner of the world. In particular, those corners of the world where indigenous peoples are living close to nature, according to their own spiritual beliefs and communal systems of governance.

The capitalist relations of production, spread under the name of ‘development’, are relations of exploitation aimed at maximizing the profitable return on capital investments. They are supported by a set of values according to which humans and nature are valued only for their utility in the process of production, where nature is valued only as a source of resources for economic exploitation, and humans are valued only as suppliers of labour and as consumers of industrial commodities.

‘Development’ is the mechanism by which the culture of capitalist exploitation is extended to all corners of the world, to the exclusion of all other forms of knowledge, understanding and behaviour – particularly those of indigenous peoples.

The effect of ‘development’ on indigenous peoples in the context of ‘rural development’.

Rural development in the Global South is driven by Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development who follow World Bank dictates to orient agricultural production to export and incorporate indigenous farmers into their operations of transnational corporations as exploited workers.

The outcome is the fracturing of their community networks, the separation of indigenous farmers from their land, their communities, and their cultures, and their incorporation into to a world of individual enterprise, commercial competition and market dependency.

The result for indigenous farmers is dependency upon global markets, vulnerability to exploitative contracts, debt traps caused by falling prices for agricultural products and rising costs of agricultural inputs, and growing risks to plant, animal and human health from the use of pesticides mandated by the requirements of commercial monocultures.

SPERI’s work

SPERI’s work over the last 30 years has been to empower indigenous peoples to maintain their cultural and ecological integrity of their traditional forms of agriculture. Our logo is ‘Nurturing Nature’, but we recognise that to nurture nature you also have to nurture the knowledge, practices and beliefs of those communities living in the forest and sustaining themselves through their ecological forms of cultivation. There is a direct link between cultural diversity and biological diversity, and it is the aim of SPERI to nurture both.

During the more than 30 years of working alongside indigenous ethnic minority peoples in Southeast Asia, SPERI has come to understand their aspirations for ‘**Livelihood Sovereignty**’,

which we define in terms of five interrelated 'livelihood rights' necessary for their future security and wellbeing:

- 1) The right to their own land;
- 2) The right to their own religion;
- 3) The right to their own endogenous culture with their own dialectical view of their Ecological Landscape;
- 4) The right to their own cultivation practices using local seed varieties;
- 5) The right to co-govern their own natural resources with neighbouring communities and local authorities.

It is these rights that are being directly put at risk by the encroachment of industrial agriculture into the forested areas they occupy.

Our work is to defend indigenous communities from this encroachment by working with them to have their customary laws, land use practices and communal land ownership legally recognised and protected by law.

So where does this leave Western development agencies who seek to aid NGOs concerned about the preservation of cultural and natural diversity in their countries?

In our work with indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia we come across communities who have had their land and forests taken from them and reallocated to the use of agribusiness corporations.

It is Western development agencies who are behind this dispossessing of indigenous people of their land, and the turning of formerly independent ecological cultivators into wage dependent workers, working for foreign owned industrial corporations in the destruction of their own ecological landscapes. The first step in this process has been the re-allocation of communally owned land to individual title, and the individually owned land to local companies.

What are these aid agencies really aiding?

In one step they are aiding the destruction of the peoples and forests that the world so desperately needs in the fight against global environmental collapse.

Why are that Western development agencies embarked upon such a destructive project?

It is because they still carry a colonial mentality of the superiority of their way of life - one of exploiting the environment for profit and of over consuming the worlds resources.

It is this way of life that is destroying the planet. So why are they so keen on spreading this environmentally destructive way of life to everyone in the world? Can't they see that by doing so they are threatening their own existence?

What can Western development agencies do to decolonize themselves?

A first step would be to rid themselves of the idea that the failing model of capitalist development is fit for export, and start working toward an alternative model of development. They should recognise that by promoting industrialization in the countryside they are aiding the destruction of indigenous communities and their natural forests, and thereby undermining the foundations of their own ecological survival.

We are all dependent for our future survival on the rainforest world. And those rainforests are dependent for their survival on the indigenous peoples who live in them and maintain their ecological integrity. It is in everyone's interests to end the social and ecological destruction caused by the expansion of industrial agriculture into the rainforest regions of the world by supporting the indigenous people who live in and sustain them.

Can I finish by saying that not all international development agencies fit the profile that I have presented here! There are some NGO funding agencies such as SODI, with an understanding of Grass-root Participatory Learning, who are respectful of indigenous communities, and who are contributing to the empowerment of these communities to re-gain their own land, values and livelihood identity.

Thank you to you all for listening.