



## Decolonization of education from the perspective of a Norwegian solidarity organisation for students and academics

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For us in SAIH it's not the daily fare that one of our policy papers becomes the centre of a huge public debate. That was the case in the summer and fall of 2018 when we adopted a resolution calling for decolonization of higher education, questioning the exceptionality of Western academia. Along with a seminar held at PRIO (the Peace Research Institute in Oslo), this sparked a debate with quite harsh criticism from parts of Norwegian academia (Lie, 2018). We called for more visibility of perspectives that are overlooked due to colonial structures still present in academia, and by many this was perceived as a threat to the status quo (Nilsen, 2018). We experienced being ascribed opinions that lay far from SAIH's work and policies - ranging from populism, anti-science, political correctness, and being compared with anti-vaxxers (Solberg, 2018). One thing was the criticisms that were built on straw man arguments (Sæbø, 2018) or misinterpretations, but what also took us by surprise was the scepticism, and fear that decolonization would harm the quality of education and research (Saugstad et al., 2018). To us, this seemed like a paradox, as decolonial perspectives could in our opinion open up for a chance to critically revisit curricula and teaching practices, and by that strengthen academia as a consequence.

Another argument brought forward in the debate was that decolonization is an imported trend, but that it is not relevant in Norway, and that SAIH and others were calling for decolonization to be fashionable. While it is true that decolonization of education in a Norwegian context was new for SAIH in 2018, many scholars and students had already been engaged in the topic for a long time and had been making tremendous efforts when the debate came up in 2018. As for SAIH, we

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have in many ways been working with decolonization ever since we were founded in 1961, and it goes to the core of the values of what we stand for and work for.

SAIH was founded as part of Norwegian students' involvement in the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa. Since then, SAIH has worked with our partners for liberation and decolonization both as a struggle against formal colonial powers and coloniality in education systems. Today, SAIH is a medium-size aid organisation in Norway, with long-term development cooperation partnerships with 30 organisations in Southern Africa, Asia, and Latin America. We are governed democratically by member organisations comprising the whole higher education sector, such as university boards, academic unions, student-elected representatives, and activists.

Our motto is "education for liberation" is inspired by the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire's work, especially in "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed" from 1968. Without critical perspectives, education will only serve to reproduce existing power structures and norms in society. We believe that education can be central in creating fairer societies, but that requires an education that takes the students' own context into account and enables critical and independent thinking. The idea of a liberating education aligns well with the core issues of the decolonization project (Freire, 1968).

SAIH's development cooperation efforts are based in our democratically adopted development cooperation strategy, clearly stating the importance of mutual partnerships. SAIH constantly strive to create equal partnerships in our international work. This is not necessarily the norm in development cooperation, and in the same way that colonial structures define what is considered valuable knowledge, colonial structures also define who has knowledge and capacity and thus can define and in a sense "produce" development (Alcoff, 2007). Despite good intentions and sometimes even thorough awareness and counter-measures, development cooperation is often characterized by a top-down donor-recipient relationship where the donor defines targets and strategies, and the recipient operationalises. Bearing in mind the earlier mentioned colonial structures, there is a divide between the "developed" expertise role of the donor and the recipients' role as underdeveloped and in need of guidance. These structures and these roles are not necessarily "enforced" by either donor or recipient, but are there as a given power relation. In some areas of development, this is more problematic than others, education being a good example. For example, it might seem obvious that the knowledge of what needs to be taught resides with those that know and live in the context in which education takes place. This is not always the case. Our work with decolonization is one very clear example of the advantages of striving for partnerships rather than the "easier" top-down donor-recipient relationship. Why? Because without having as our outset that *we could learn something* from our partners, we might never have learned all that we have learned about the decolonization of education. There are some comparisons to be made with power relations in academia in this sense. What role do the participants have in a research project? Can they be part of defining the challenges of the project? In what way will the project benefit those who took part in it? And in the case of education - what relationship is there between the students

and the professor or between students of different backgrounds? Is there room for challenges and discussion, or is the main focus to get through all that can come up in the final exam?

In line with international frameworks, SAIH supports indigenous peoples' right to education, including supporting the verification and approval of autonomous indigenous and intercultural universities such as University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast (URACCAN) and Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural (UAIIN) in the Cauca region of Colombia. These institutions strive to ensure indigenous peoples' and afro-descendants' right to an education built upon their cultural knowledge, reality, and worldview and have shown that there is no contradiction between quality education and decolonized education through achieving formal recognition. We are inspired by what UAIIN and URACCAN have built, and how they have challenged western academia in establishing a decolonial education and knowledge production. They form part of the Network of Indigenous, Intercultural and Community Universities (RUIICAY) that mutually strengthen each other and lobby for implementing an intercultural approach to higher education in the entire region. Latin-American countries are intercultural, with a population of indigenous peoples, afro-descendant communities, migrant population, and broad cultural diversity that has never been recognized. URACCAN, after 25 years of being the first intercultural university in Latin-America, also forms part of the National University Board in Nicaragua, putting them in a position to influence the national education policy and the mainstream universities in the region to focus on intercultural education. Those perspectives and experiences from our partner organisations form some of the basis of our policy work in Norway and have motivated and given us tools to work towards decolonization of higher education in Norway. It is also an example of how decolonial struggles are both local and global, and that we in countries in the North have so much to learn from the work done based on the reality in countries in the South.

For SAIH, decolonizing education is paramount to achieve the goal of liberating education. Liberation through education centres around being able to understand and disentangle power relations and structures. Only through understanding these structures is it possible to change them (Freire, 1968). Education has historically been a key means of weakening or eradicating indigenous languages, culture, and worldviews. State assimilation policy through the education system has had serious consequences for indigenous people's life and social development, as well as for their ability to be knowledge producers. Colonial education has contributed to shaming indigenous peoples, hiding their language, identities, and history. Colonial education reinforces power relations that have been formally abolished. As we start the larger discussions on decolonizing education, there are so many aspects to consider. One is all the knowledge that exists which is unacknowledged, another is all the knowledge that has been lost (Walsh, 2012). Finally, there is also the fact that this knowledge has been kept out of academia through not being acknowledged, this renders it difficult to find ways that we can use and refine all the traditional knowledge in academic settings properly and respectfully. There are centuries of progress possibly lost, and a long way to go to build trust between academia and those it has rejected.

The debate in Norway seems to have shown that many researchers perceive the western status quo in academia as having been perfected. It also uncovered a lingering divide between positivist scholars and critical scholars, neither acknowledging the continued existence of the other in academia, as if those debates had been settled in the last century. The polemics of the decolonization debate has showcased just how persistent a silo mentality in academia is, and that this might prove to be one of the big obstacles to decolonizing academia. There is simply no agreement on what currently counts as legitimate disciplines and methods, and what constitutes parts of academia and not. Being part of the debate, it has been discouraging to see the lack of willingness to ask critical questions and to evaluate established truths to gain new insights.

Building on our experiences from this debate and our partner organisations, as well as through inspiration from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Decolonizing Learning and Teaching Toolkit, SAIH has created the pedagogical toolkit «An introduction to the decolonization of academia» (SOAS, 2018; SAIH, 2020). The hope is that the toolkit can create an easy way into the rather complex issue of decolonizing higher education and inspire students and academics to challenge colonial structures in teaching and curriculum in Norwegian universities. Building on the experiences from Cauca in Colombia and the autonomous regions of Nicaragua – where the work for decolonization is done not because it is “fashionable” but because it is a necessity, we knew when we entered this topic that it is long-term, tough and thorough work. Much of this work is to make decolonization understandable for students and scholars, show the relevance and make it approachable. Decolonization is about creating awareness, but it also a long process of real changes. These changes we believe should come from the grassroot level, by way of discussions in lunchrooms, seminars and faculty meetings, revised curriculum, awareness, and changes in attitude.

We hope that the decolonizing of education will enable us all to think critically. Decolonization is a process that does not only focus on inclusion and promotion of diversity. The premise for decolonization is the recognition that there exist prejudices and biases in power structures, which are based on broader colonial processes and contribute to shaping the knowledge structures of today. If education is to create social change, education must provide students with critical and independent thinking and teach them to rethink knowledge structures and be able to create new content. That is why we have to look at how education itself reflects and reinforces global power relations. The decolonization of higher education can improve the quality of higher education, by enriching the curriculum, teaching, and research with a broader, more diverse, intercultural understanding of knowledge. It is a matter of reflection and change, of gaining awareness about why things are the way they are, and who is included and excluded as a result. This is why decolonization will entail different measures at different campuses, within different academic disciplines, and for different people (SAIH, 2020). Decolonizing is curiosity, it is broadening your view, exploring other methodologies. With this debate and our toolkit, we want academics to critically reflect on their role, their biases, their curriculums, and their assumptions. To be able to

decolonize higher education, academics must dare to be critical of the knowledge they have acquired, as well as being open to new relevant knowledge that traditionally does not fit into their academic discipline. Power structures and representation in academia must be challenged and discussed *together* with the students. Students must also be challenged to be critical of what they are learning. With our toolkit, we are inviting students and academics to join the debate.

For SAIH, decolonization is about striving for nuanced knowledge, asking questions, and being exposed to a multitude of perspectives. We want to uncover the unequal power structures that are also found at Norwegian educational institutions and create increased awareness of our own history. We believe that this can be done by, among other things, recognizing our colonial past and which mechanisms undermine diversity in academia. Most importantly, this cannot be done alone. We look forward to continuing to discuss and deliberating the decolonization of academia. We depend on academics engaging in the debate in all forms possible, from lectures to research projects. This special issue focusing on Decolonial Options in Education is one important contribution, that we are glad to be part of.

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