

Walking the Talk Towards a Sustainable and Equitable Future for All

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Global Health problems are systemic, complex, and wicked by nature. Relations, interests, and power dynamics are entangled within every layer of a problem. It is almost as if every time we want to solve a problem, a chain of further problems appears. It is tiring. It is frustrating. It is demoralizing. But giving up is not an option, because injustices are the kind of phenomena we cannot and should not accept. I have received lots of resistance as a response to my “*this system must change*”-mentality. Many even remarked “*you will be sad all your life if you continue down this path*”. I understand their vantage point. I understand that it is easier to be comfortable than to be uncomfortable. But I know that my nationality holds privileges. I know that my passport holds privileges. I know that I walk on my paths with privileges; paths that are clean and safe to walk on. I know that paths in other parts of the world might look different and be less safe. And I know that people might be less privileged than me. Should I ignore these people?

The Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) dates back to colonial times. Its mere foundation was created by slaves a bit over 100 years ago. Up to this day, KIT displays anthropological and cultural artefacts from across the Dutch colonies. As such, holding a conference about decolonizing Global Health and creating equitable partnerships in a former colonial building offers a special depth to the topic. It is almost as if you can feel the vibrations of ancestors in the air, in the halls, in the walls, in the art, across the marble floor, and wooden doors. That day, I looked at every door: heavy, thick, dark brown pieces of wood made from trees long extinct. I tried to imagine the hands cutting down the branches, before having to ship the trees’ nourishment across the world to serve as doors for prosperous homes; to shut out, rather than to let in. Now these trees are serving as artifacts, like the Indonesian and African art that decorate the rooms of the Royal Tropical Institute. I wonder to whom these artifacts belonged, and what these people would tell me if they had a chance. It is a known fact that Museums and collectors make millions with stolen art¹. In the name of history – of course – without taking into consideration that history itself is written from the winner’s perspective, silencing voices that could have altered history’s path. When we think of colonialism, we often think of the exploitation of resources and people, but “colonialism is not purely about what was taken away, but also about the disrupted processes and destroyed visions of people” says Dr. Wanjiru Kamau-Rutenberg, one of the key speakers that day.

Fast forward 100 years, the KIT functions as a center for expertise, dedicated to international cooperation, Global Health, intercultural understanding, and the Sustainable Development Goals. It has a long standing tradition of unmasking colonial pathways by recognizing the need for cooperation across sectors. This comes at a time when today's problems are more interconnected than ever: the COVID-19 pandemic leaving economies crippled, wars, inflation, and climate change with its heat periods, floods, and hunger crises; these challenges all stretch across the globe. Yet, we often do not act in tandem to work on these issues and tend to only address them when they reach our doorsteps. But the path leading up to our doorstep is the crucial one. We cannot *walk the talk* without partnerships. We cannot achieve the Sustainable Development Goals without cooperation. But partnerships are delicate, and they need to be based in equitable and shared understandings of problems and solutions. For Dr. Samuel Oji Oti, the first step to achieving equitable partnerships lies in speaking up about imbalances. In fact, the question should no longer be “who sits at the table”, but rather “on what terms”. We need to recognize that merely having a seat at the table does not fulfill the criteria for equitable partnerships.

Climate change functions as the elephant in the room. It is a problem that unites us all – albeit to different extents. Of course we all need to put in the work and effort to keep this planet clean, inhabitable, and with resources to thrive. However, bills should not be paid equally, but rather equitably. It is unfair to expect countries and populations of the Global South to subsidize the excessive lifestyles of people in the West, explains Dr. Wanjiru Kamau-Rutenberg. Furthermore, Dr. Wanjiru Kamau-Rutenberg states that climate change reports have an Africa-shaped gap, with only 8 of the 91 lead authors of the IPCC special report on climate warming coming from Africa, thereby ignoring the voices of the people that have been experiencing its most vicious effects. Why are the voices not making it into the reports? Is there no expertise in Africa? The opposite is true. It turns out, the majority of funding attributed to climate change goes to research institutes in the Global North, leaving only about 14% of funding to go to climate observation research in Africa². It is shocking: We are using European and Western centered data to predict and govern climate change in Africa.

In the West, we tend to believe we know best. But the mere idea, that I, as a person with knowledge have the power to save less fortunate beings, is in itself colonial. History and narratives repeat themselves over time. The Global South does not need to be saved by white

people. It did not need saving back then, and it does not need saving right now. What it does need, is for us to be accountable. According to Dr. Zuleika Bibi Sheik, success should not be equated with materialism or power, but rather with people standing in dignity. That means we need to stop believing that a model of unlimited growth built on the backs of people, natural habitats, and other species, is sustainable. After all, has our ecosystem become a marketplace governed by those with the financial and standing power to exploit it?

As researchers, we study, sample, delineate, analyze, source, fail, and do it all over again. But, the way we carry out, view, and read research, however objectively we aim to set its parameters, will always be from within current points of reference, points of estimates, schema, cultures, socializations, hegemonic power structures, etc. A way to widen this narrow point of view, is to co-create knowledge from the start, engaging recipients and stakeholders the proposed change will affect and accepting that their way of knowing might supersede our narrow point of view. After all, “education is not something you can finish” said Isaac Asimov. Indeed, it is a devotion, you crave the knowledge to get behind the hidden meaning. Not for your own sake, but to understand just a bit more to get to the bottom of it.

I have not always walked the talk, but I have listened to the talk. With every piece of knowledge gained, I uncover the layers of power relations I am taking part in, becoming ever more aware of the system that governs my actions. Every once in a while, we should stop walking and wonder: In which constellation am I walking? What is my position on this path and how do I stand in relationship to others? Where does the money come from? Who sets the agenda? Who is complicit in upholding power structures? Should I work for these people? Should I foster these partnerships? I think if we all would reflect on these questions throughout our daily lives, rather than just accepting our own entry point, we could achieve equitable partnerships and sustainable outcomes for all. I believe the best thing about knowledge is that the more you learn, the more you can no longer unsee. With knowledge comes responsibility.

Throughout this piece, I have used terms such as Global South, Global North, and the West. I would like to remark that these terms are flawed and spark colonial debates by themselves. I am not trying to establish that Global South or North are homogenous entities or that the classification is correct. The term was used throughout the conference, and I am employing it

for the sake of my article. Nonetheless, I encourage readers of this article to educate themselves further about this debate.

1 Tharoor, Kanishk. "Museums and Looted Art: The Ethical Dilemma of Preserving World Cultures."

The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, June 29, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/jun/29/museums-looting-art-artefacts-world-culture>.

2 Nosmot Gbadamosi, "Africa Has a Climate Funding Shortfall: The IPCC Report Highlights a Major Financing Gap for Climate Adaptation Research Focused on the Continent.," Foreign Policy, March 9, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/09/africa-climate-crisis-funding-shortfall-ipcc-report/>.