

Article

A Food Sovereignty Approach to Localization in International Solidarity

Beatriz Oliver ^{1,*}, Leticia Ama Deawuo ² and Sheila Rao ^{3,4}¹ Director of International Programs, SeedChange, Ottawa, ON K1P 5B1, Canada² Executive Director, SeedChange, Ottawa, ON K1P 5B1, Canada³ Gender and Social Inclusion Specialist, SeedChange, Ottawa, ON K1P 5B1, Canada⁴ Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Concordia University, Montreal, QC H3G 1M8, Canada

* Correspondence: boliver@weseedchange.org

Abstract: Renewed calls for localization and the “decolonization of aid” are raising questions about whose knowledge and control are privileged. This article argues that in order to support local decision-making on food systems and agricultural aid, international solidarity work should look towards food sovereignty and agroecology approaches. Food sovereignty and agroecology, informed by feminist approaches, can provide important lessons for localization as they prioritize local knowledge and decision-making, and are based on social justice principles. They also provide alternatives to the problematic concept of “development”, particularly the agro-industrial development model which contributes to environmental and health crises, corporate concentration, colonialism and inequality. An example of the trajectory of the NGO SeedChange is provided to help illustrate how food sovereignty can: (1) provide an alternative to problematic development concepts, and (2) encourage localization and greater priority to global South perspectives. While acknowledging that there exist contradictions and challenges to shared decision-making, learning from partners in the global South working for seed and food sovereignty has been crucial to shaping the organization’s programs and policy advocacy.

Keywords: localization; NGOs; food sovereignty; agroecology; development



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1. Introduction

The colonial and neo-colonial aspects of development projects have been described by critics for many decades. In the post-World War II period, large development agencies pushed a model that was based on advancement in stages from “underdeveloped” to “developed” as exemplified by Northern industrial economies [1]. The legacy of colonialism in creating inequality and extractivist economic relationships was not acknowledged in this formulation, and poverty was portrayed as apolitical [1]. Many of the same neo-colonial relationships continued or intensified in the name of development [2] ¹. Today, wealth and resources continue to flow out of Indigenous and global South communities and countries in the global South. From 2000 to 2017, net transfers of financial resources from “developing” to “developed” countries grew and exceeded overseas development assistance (ODA) flows [3]. As one critic observed, this is “aid in reverse” [4].

The idea of development grew to be powerful as an economic prescription as well as creating “perceptions, myths and fantasies” [5] (p. 1). According to Escobar [6] (p. 9), as a discourse, development “created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World,” reproduced and promoted by development professionals and institutions. Despite many alternative definitions and transformations of the concept, including sustainable development, the dominant discourse of development continues to focus on economic growth [6]. This primacy of economic growth has often been used to promote trade liberalization, privatization and productivist approaches in agriculture (see for example [7]).

In recent years, many NGO observers and workers have explicitly called for the “decolonization” of aid and development (see for examples [8–11]). Decolonization in aid and development integrates critiques of colonialism and white supremacy, and strongly advocates for addressing systemic and structural racism [11]. It raises questions about the “white gaze”—how the priorities and lens of white people tend to dominate, including how stereotypical images are used to advance charity fundraising [11]. Across all these discussions is the importance of local control. At a first level, this involves “localization”, which is a move away from external decision-making and towards local ownership, leadership and expertise [12]. As noted by Cooperation Canada, “Overall, localization, in its full meaning, entails fundamental transformation of international cooperation mechanisms” ([12], see also [13]). Collaborative and flexible processes for funding and agenda-setting are part of the solution [12].

Localization may be especially important in the cases of NGOs with headquarters in the global North and country offices abroad. However, there are often inequalities even when the partners are local organizations. There are inherent power dynamics related to the role of NGOs from the global North as funders. For example, the Canada Revenue Agency obliges Canadian registered charities to maintain ongoing “direction and control” when working through an “intermediary” non-profit organization in another country². Development terminology can also overshadow and suppress local and Indigenous concepts. A survey of NGOs in the global South showed that most (65%) confirmed their collaboration with international NGOs is based on principles of equality, but that the practices and programs do not sufficiently consider local realities, and projects relied heavily on “western defined systems and models”, resulting in several negative impacts [14]. Unfortunately, organizations receiving funding may not feel sufficient trust to question reporting requirements with their funder partners. Reporting requirements that are heavy and inflexible, with overemphasis on donor monitoring frameworks, can result in local partners dedicating more time to administration and less to working in communities and doing policy work. The concept of “NGOization” indicates that such bureaucratization can redirect attention and space away from social movement organizing [15].

A further level of critique thus concerns the role of NGOs themselves. NGOs include a wide range of organizations and methods of work, from pressing political demands linked to social movements to carrying out more reformist work as part of rural development projects for example [15]. In many cases, NGOs play a bridging role between aid agencies and communities or grassroots organizations but are primarily accountable to overseas funders’ criteria and interests [16] (p. 132). In part, the increase in the number of NGOs also resulted from the withdrawal of the state from providing services [15] (p. 7). Associated with this trend has been a discourse surrounding NGOs in which they are viewed in terms of partnerships and civil society, while not all have clear constituencies to which they are accountable.

Discussion of decolonization of aid and development raises deep questions. The discourse on the decolonization of aid has been critiqued by some as not led by actors in the global South [17]. Use of the concept of decolonization as a metaphor, rather than its literal meaning for Indigenous sovereignty today (primarily regarding land), has also been pointed out as being problematic [18]. For NGOs, these discussions can be fraught with the contradictions arising from acting within colonial power structures. Without a connection to social movements, the debates risk low legitimacy. Several advocates argue that decolonizing development includes taking a more political, solidarity approach, such as activism directed towards harmful foreign policies and extractivist industries [8]. It may also require abandoning the problematic concept of development altogether in favor of alternatives such as degrowth, centralizing Indigenous knowledge systems and a focus on the re-distribution of power and decision-making between global North and South divisions. Food sovereignty and agroecology are also such alternatives, we argue in this paper. Food sovereignty is the rights of peoples to “define their own food and agriculture systems” [19]. Agroecology, as a central aspect of food sovereignty, originated in agrarian

movements and has a strong focus on the knowledge and experiences of Indigenous and smallholder farmers [20].

This paper discusses an example of an evolution in approaches for the NGO SeedChange, previously USC Canada (weseedchange.org), that demonstrated various engagements with development and its alternatives. SeedChange began as a humanitarian organization in 1945, later focused on community development projects and then adopted a food sovereignty framework in recent decades. Decisions about agricultural programming were strongly influenced by South-South and North-South exchanges with partner organizations beginning in the late 1980s in particular. Today, rather than aid and development, SeedChange uses food sovereignty and agroecology with an increasingly feminist focus, to guide its work and relationships. In addition to providing an alternative framework to development, food sovereignty and agroecology provide important lessons for sharing power as they are strongly rooted in participatory methods and social justice principles. Further, feminist approaches in agroecology call for participatory, gender-based analysis for actions to address intersectional forms of inequality in agriculture and food systems [21].

This paper aims to contribute to discussions on localization and how NGOs can help address power imbalances in decision-making in international programs on agriculture. Recently, SeedChange engaged in internal learning about localization, decolonization and feminist approaches to international partnerships. While these discussions and learning are ongoing, outcomes include a commitment to improve shared decision-making and incorporate feminist frameworks. While not immune to the problems discussed above, due to SeedChange's role as an NGO and a funder organization located in the global North, use of food sovereignty and agroecology frameworks has helped to center farmer-led approaches and collaborative decision-making. SeedChange is also prioritizing learning from women's rights organizations and incorporating feminist methods.

2. Methods

The authors of this article are employed by SeedChange and hope that this paper will support critical reflections and contribute to improved partnership approaches at the organization, and perhaps contribute to broader discussions and practices. The case study in this paper is based on a review of internal and external documents produced by SeedChange, and a consultation process for this article within SeedChange in February 2022. The internal documents included SeedChange's Strategic Plan 2020–2025 (2019), Theory of Change (2020), Policy Statement (2019), and the International Partnership Principles and Background Paper (2021). External resources reviewed include SeedChange's website, publications and public service announcements. Finally, small consultative workshops on this article with some staff working on international programs and in the senior management team were organized by the lead author in early 2022 with the participation of six persons at SeedChange³. These workshops each included a presentation of the key points of this article on SeedChange's approach to food sovereignty and agroecology and international partnerships, with a participatory discussion to provide feedback and general observations.

The International Partnership Principles was a key document in this process. In early 2021, SeedChange's international programs team carried out a set of internal participatory workshops to document and improve the organization's approaches to work with international partners. This was accompanied by a review of the internal documents and a literature review of both academic and non-academic writings on the "decolonization of aid" and feminist approaches to international solidarity. Informed by the literature consulted, reflections from the workshops, and previous informal discussions within the organization and with partners, staff leading this approach wrote a draft background paper. Validation workshops were then carried out on the background paper and a draft set of "partnership principles" were developed by SeedChange's international programs team. This process also drew upon discussions and readings on decolonization and localization shared by the Canadian Food Security Policy Group (FSPG), a network of NGOs working on food security internationally⁴.

A framework that was useful early in the process is provided by Fowler (2000), who argues that we can think of relationships between NGOs as “differentiated by the ‘breadth’ of organisational engagement negotiated”, ranging in order of decreasing mutual engagement from: partner (which involves co-management aspects), to institutional supporter, program supporter, project funder, and ally [22]. All of these are valid and appropriate in different contexts. On the other hand, the sharing of power within those relationships can be thought of in terms of “depth”, beginning with information exchange at the most “shallow” end, to consultation, shared influence, and finally joint control [22]. Power dynamics related to funding and the “gatekeeper” role of larger or northern NGOs (who have greater access to northern agency funding), include greater control and agenda setting by these [23]. Fowler recommends that while taking into account cultural differences, it can be helpful to openly discuss the type of relationship that exists in a partnership, noting that “Agreeing on relative influence within a relationship is one way of addressing, if not redressing, power differences” [22] (p. 6). These two concepts—the breadth and depth of shared power—was a key starting point for the internal workshops on partnership aspirations.

Feminist approaches also provided important guidance on methodology. SeedChange has long integrated gender equality and women’s empowerment aspects in programs, but only in recent years has taken a stronger approach to integrate an explicitly feminist framework (e.g., feminist agroecology), as explained further below. Feminist approaches to international solidarity include adopting more horizontal and participatory approaches, self-reflexivity and deep listening [24]. These aspects were integrated into the reflection workshops and throughout the drafting of the partnership principles and remain central to efforts to focus on mutual learning and collaborative creation of knowledge in current and future work according to SeedChange international programs’ staff.

A key limitation of the development of the draft partnership principles document was that it is unfinished. While the document is meant to orient SeedChange, it also indicates a need for transparency on power dynamics and discussion of these issues with international partners. While the ideas were briefly presented in an online workshop in October 2021 with partners from East Africa, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions at the time, the virtual nature of the meeting limited discussion of sensitive subjects. This limitation affects this article as well, as it does not reflect consultation with partners. It is hoped by the authors and staff consulted that in the coming months and years, opportunities for genuine in-person discussions on these issues can be realized.

3. Results and Discussion

The discussion below provides an analysis, based on the literature review, of key problems created by the agro-industrial development model in terms of colonialism, neo-colonialism and the top-down imposition of technologies. It then provides an overview of counter-solutions offered by food sovereignty and agroecology approaches. This review is useful to indicate why food sovereignty and agroecology encourage local decision-making and thus also localization. It is followed by a description of the trajectory at SeedChange and adoption of the food sovereignty and agroecology approaches based on influence by its partners and other organizations in the global South, as well as how these frameworks also strengthened localization actions and learning within the organization. Final observations on internal reflections are discussed, offering potential next steps for the organization and for broader debates on localization.

3.1. Neo-Colonialism in Agriculture

Indigenous and smallholder farmers around the world are crucial food providers and their food systems have been essential to create and maintain biological diversity [25]. Farms that rely mostly on family labor are the majority of farms and produce more than 80% of the world’s food [26]. Crop diversity has been stewarded through farmer’s ongoing selection and breeding of varieties, as well by conserving a relationship with the wild relatives of domesticated crops [27]. Biodiversity in farming is valuable because it reduces

risks of crop failure and because varieties have different desired qualities that respond to culinary, ecological and storage needs [28]. By planting locally adapted varieties that farmers select and harvest themselves, households reduce the cost of agricultural inputs and grow a variety of foods which improve family nutrition as well as maintain crop diversity. Farmers' seed systems continue to provide for the majority of smallholder seed requirements in the global South ([29,30] (p. 50)).

Despite several international conventions and treaties that value and recognize these contributions and enshrine farmers' rights, smallholder farmers around the world continue to face economic and political hardship⁵. Indigenous farming communities in Latin America, for example, were already forced on marginal lands through colonialism and continued dispossession of prime lands by elite landholders and corporations. These processes continue today as Indigenous territorial defenders face high rates of threats and murder [31]. Due to trade liberalization, the dumping of lower-priced agricultural products depresses prices at the local markets that smallholders primarily sell to [32,33]. Cuts to public rural extension programs decreased support to farmers [34] (pp. 5–6)⁶. Climate change is now significantly exacerbating hardship and instability. For example, in Central America, crop failures due to climate change and the lack of livelihood opportunities are among key factors motivating emigration [36].

Another push factor has been the industrialization of agriculture. Beginning in the 1960s, under the "Green Revolution", international research centers and governments promoted farmer access to hybrid seeds and their chemical inputs, along with monocropping and specialization, in order to increase production. Many local varieties were displaced by these external seeds [27]. Smallholders in many regions of Latin America, facing competition from industrial agriculture and unable to pay for the new technologies, were forced to leave the countryside [37]. Land concentration and monocrops often came to replace once biologically and culturally diverse lands. In recent decades, seed laws in many countries have placed restrictions on farmers' use of seeds developed by companies, which limits their ability to save, select, exchange and sell seeds as needed [38]. Rising use of chemical inputs have led to land degradation, water contamination, and pesticide resistance [39] (p. 18–20). Destructive agricultural practices and their colonial expansion have also impacted the diverse traditional harvesting systems of Indigenous communities [40,41].

The Green Revolution was characterized by a "technology transfer" approach which mainly advantaged large-scale operations, in part because the experiment settings of research stations have generally not been attuned to the conditions of smallholder farms [42,43]. Such technology transfer or "blueprint" models are harmful since they simplify what are complex and adaptive systems [43] (p. 240). According to Altieri, "agricultural diversity results from local variations in climate, soils, economic relations, social structures and cultural history, making it very difficult for developers to claim that there is only one unique agricultural development strategy able to deal with such complexity" [42] (p. 113).

Today, the technology transfer approach based on industrial inputs, including seeds, is strongly influenced by collaboration between influential philanthropy and private sector collaborations, which also fund and influence intergovernmental agencies and NGOs. For example, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) is an initiative founded in 2006 with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Many farmers' and civil society organizations in Africa have critiqued AGRA for going against food sovereignty by working to influence national agricultural policies and promote dependence on external inputs, including introduced and transgenic seeds along with the high level of agrochemical inputs they require (e.g., [44,45]; see also [46]). The organization GRAIN has documented that the majority of the funding from AGRA has gone to organizations and research centers in the global North (including NGOs), and there is little evidence of support to farmer-led research [47].

AGRA promotes "agro-dealer networks" linked to chemical and seed companies [48]. In many cases, the promotion of agrochemical and seed inputs has been supported with public programs from African governments [45]. A related initiative with reach in several

continents, Gates Ag One, continues in this path, stating they will work with public- and private-sector partners and governments, “to enable the advancement of resilient, yield-enhancing seeds and traits globally and facilitate the introduction of those breakthroughs into specific crops essential to smallholder farmers.” Navdanya International has called these efforts the “recolonisation of agriculture”, as public agricultural research centers and programs are increasingly directed by private sector interests and farmer dependency is being promoted [49].

3.2. Food Sovereignty and Agroecology

Agroecology in its present form is often described as a science, practice and movement of sustainable agriculture [50]⁷. Agroecology is increasingly considered the best approach for food system resilience by leading agricultural experts (see [51–53]). Rather than promote dependence on external and often toxic synthetic agrochemicals, agroecology is ideally about strengthening smallholder’s own local resources and valuing their knowledge. Central to agroecology is the importance of farmer’s own decision-making. As noted in a recent publication about funding for agroecology: “Agroecology, in its transformative form, is deeply attuned and emergent from particular people in particular places (territories) with their languages, cosmovisions and lifeworlds. Agroecology is fundamentally about respecting and enabling this and programmes and development must not force peoples into cookie-cutter approaches driven by the Global North” [54] (p. 11).

Agroecological methods are diverse, but a central principle is to promote crop diversity and the recycling of nutrients in agroecosystems for long-term sustainability [55]. Conservation of soils and water is done through time-tested and locally adapted techniques such as live barriers, composting, and terracing. Many practices have multiple purposes, such as agroforestry where diverse perennial plants produce products for food and income, generate organic matter, maintain moisture in the soil, moderate temperatures, cycle nutrients in the soil, provide shade for animals, and reduce erosion from water and wind [56] (p. 244–248). As part of agroecology, promotion of agrobiodiversity provides numerous benefits for food security, income diversification, and farm management (e.g., intercropping to reduce pest infestations) [56].

A growing number of research and community experiences indicate that agroecology can be a pathway for women’s empowerment—essential for more just and sustainable food systems—and that more feminist agroecology is needed [57–60]. Agriculture is an important source of livelihood for women and, in some regions, it is women who provide most of the agricultural labor [61]. Women are often responsible for small livestock as well as the management of diverse, critical crops for household food security [61]. Yet, rural women face many barriers and inequalities, including constraints to social and political participation, infringements on rights, sexual- and gender-based violence, lower wages and higher care responsibilities [62]. Women farmers around the world have far less access to agricultural resources and services than their male counterparts and are disproportionately affected by the climatic and economic pressures facing smallholders [61,62]. For these reasons—and to benefit from women’s knowledge and approaches—women should be prioritized in agricultural programs, particularly for agroecology [57].

Agroecology is also closely associated with the concept of food sovereignty. La Vía Campesina developed the latter concept in 1996 to counteract trade dumping and propose an alternative treatment to food and agriculture in opposition to the World Trade Organization. Women were key definers of food sovereignty, particularly for its holistic and ecological approach [63]. Food sovereignty is most often defined as: “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” [19].

Food sovereignty gained in popularity among diverse social movements. The International Forum for Food Sovereignty in Nyéléni (Mali, 2007) brought together organizations from around the world, for example. They identified six “pillars” of food sovereignty: Focuses on food for people, Builds knowledge and skills, Works with nature, Values food

providers, Localizes food systems, and Puts control locally. “Food is sacred” was added as a seventh pillar by members of the Indigenous Circle of the People’s Food Policy process organized by Food Secure Canada in 2008–2011 [64]. According to the Nyéléni gathering, a system based on food sovereignty would ideally prioritize local food production and consumption, produced through ecological methods, and institute genuine agrarian reform that also “defends and recovers the territories of indigenous peoples” [19]. Dawn Morrisson notes “The food sovereignty approach provides a restorative framework for identifying ways that social and political advocates from the settler communities can work to support Indigenous food sovereignty in a bottom-up approach to influencing policy, driven by traditional practice and adaptive management” [40] (p. 104). Indigenous food systems and food sovereignty are essential to community health and well-being, cultural identity and self-determination [41].

3.3. A Case Study from SeedChange

SeedChange is an NGO founded in Canada in 1945 by Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova as the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada (USC Canada). SeedChange relies on funding from the Government of Canada, foundations and public donations. It is a medium-sized NGO, with an office in Ottawa and remote-based staff in several provinces, totaling 30 staff. The board includes directors with experience in organizational governance and food sovereignty, with Indigenous and international directors playing crucial roles⁸. SeedChange’s role was recently publicly clarified and defined as supporting local organizations as trainers and facilitators for sharing knowledge, as fundraisers and funders for partners’ work, and in supporting policy advocacy [65].

SeedChange works with local organizations in mostly medium- to long-term partnerships both domestically and internationally with 14 partners in 10 countries. Due to the focus on seeds, programs are primarily located in the centers of crop origin and/or diversity in Mesoamerica, the Andes, West Africa, East Africa and Asia. International partners have been small- to medium-sized local NGOs and institutes, and smallholder and Indigenous cooperative associations. Their work overall focuses on the use of participatory and farmer-led methods to promote seed security, agroecology, agrobiodiversity, collective marketing, farmers’ rights and gender equality. Collaborations for technical assistance on seeds is an important aspect.

SeedChange was initially created for post-conflict humanitarian assistance. Canadians were encouraged to donate and provide in-kind and material support, with appeals based on “human dignity”. It was a policy of the organization to not send Canadian staff or volunteers abroad, although SeedChange had local offices in some countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, the organization became more centered on an international development focus. During that period, the humanitarian focus was still prominent, including in food aid programs⁹. In the 1980s there was a focus on community “self-help” projects, including in agriculture such as irrigation, reforestation and home gardens¹⁰. A pivotal moment came in the late 1980s, when SeedChange began work on seed security with the Ethiopian Institute of Biodiversity Conservation as part of efforts to support famine recovery. This raised awareness of the importance of seed diversity for food security and led to the creation of a major program called Seeds of Survival (SoS) to strengthen farmers’ seed systems and agrobiodiversity in several countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America [66]. South-South and South-North knowledge exchanges and international training workshops were key to sharing methodologies [66]. It was generally acknowledged that SoS approaches were directed by partners in the global South. SoS methods included strengthening access to diverse, local seeds through conservation on farms and in community seed banks, participatory plant breeding and varietal selection, and policy advocacy for farmers’ rights to seeds.

Participatory plant breeding and varietal selection are based on collaborative processes between farmers and agronomists. These methods can include the selection of local varieties to maintain and strengthen them, or the crossing of local and external varieties

to improve certain characteristics. Trials happen in local fields, and it is the community criteria (including criteria that may vary by gender) that matter the most in the selection process. These may include growing characteristics (e.g., length of cycle), yield, color, marketability, storability, cooking time, taste and others [29]. In Honduras, for example, participatory plant breeding with maize and beans has resulted in locally adapted, quality seeds in farmers' hands that have made a crucial difference in local food security [67]. This work is also linked to policy advocacy to defend community rights to freely save, exchange and sell their seeds [29]. It presents an alternative to top-down agricultural development. SeedChange and partners in at least six countries have also contributed to policy initiatives to improve national seed laws. This work for seed sovereignty—an essential aspect of food sovereignty—is a form of resistance to the expansion of the industrial agricultural model.

Inspired by the approach and results of the SoS program, it increasingly became the priority of the organization. Programs for sustainable agriculture, agrobiodiversity and farmers' seed systems became the sole focus by 2007. During these years, SeedChange also turned increasingly toward alternatives such as food sovereignty and agroecology, and away from concepts of development. Learning from partners and from international movements such as La Via Campesina led to the growing realization of common alignment with food sovereignty principles and critique of neoliberal agro-industrial models. This has meant integrating a greater focus on the root causes of problems. For example, rather than presenting hunger as being due to a lack of productivity, a food sovereignty approach has encouraged the organization to recognize “hunger as a problem of food governance, unequal distribution and injustice”¹¹. SeedChange staff had also engaged in research that led them to question mainstream development, including the publication of a book on problematic agricultural aid in Bolivia by the SeedChange executive director in 2014 [68]. Beginning in 2007, remaining local offices were phased out in a gradual process. In some cases, this resulted in the creation of new local organizations or a merger with local organizations. This “localization” strategy was deliberate and was fully achieved by 2020. The importance of working in partnership with local civil society organizations is emphasized in SeedChange communications¹².

SeedChange's work in Canada was also influenced by SoS and food sovereignty. In 2013, SeedChange created a domestic program for participatory plant breeding, learning from the importance of this approach from partners in the global South¹³. SeedChange was contacted by an Indigenous community group in Northern Manitoba for collaboration, which led to internal learning at SeedChange¹⁴. SeedChange has also been a key actor in the creation of Farmers for Climate Solutions, an initiative to reduce emissions and improve climate resilience¹⁵. Other advocacy over the last two decades has included coalition work to influence national and foreign policies on agriculture and trade, such as in civil society campaigns to counter the promotion of transgenic technologies in Canada and by the Canadian government abroad¹⁶. SeedChange included the establishment of an organizational approach for actions to support decolonization as a goal in their strategic plan. Some resulting actions included initial efforts to build relationships with Indigenous seed keepers within the borders of Canada. SeedChange is undertaking anti-racism and anti-oppression training to inform its policies (see [71]).

In terms of international partnership relationships, SeedChange is in the process of building mechanisms to improve decision-making. While SeedChange has engaged in a spectrum of relationships with different partners, directly discussing the issue of power dynamics has been rare. Internally, as indicated in the draft international partnership document, SeedChange has been identifying some guiding principles and tools. One of the conclusions, as outlined in its accompanying background paper, is the hope that integrating processes to clarify expectations in a partnership (through the discussion of aspirations for shared decision-making, for example), can be a way to help mitigate the depth and breadth of power differences, as Fowler encourages. The draft principles include a commitment to support struggles against inequality and for just and sustainable food systems, support community organizing and participatory decision-making, employ feminist methodolo-

gies, promote food sovereignty and agroecology, support the sharing and co-creation of knowledge, and promote transparent communication and mutual accountability.

Some of the main challenges identified arise from how to reach a balance to meet the reporting requirements of funding bodies while ensuring that these do not dominate partnership relationships, impose Western/colonial concepts, and negatively affect work on the ground (e.g., by taking time and energy away from supporting community actions and engaging with movement building). As noted in the document, this requires listening, questioning assumptions, and a responsibility to raise awareness and dialogue with funders and other actors working in international solidarity. These draft principles were shared with some partners in an initial online discussion in October 2021. At the time of writing this article, the organization has not yet outlined a strategy for how to facilitate a broader discussion with partners, but it was identified as a necessary next step.

A related area of learning has been on feminist approaches. SeedChange has taken an intersectional feminist approach in recent years and today includes partnerships with women's rights organizations, supported through the Feminist International Assistance Policy of the Government of Canada (FIAP). Working with a feminist lens includes acknowledging and helping to redress power asymmetries through a solidarity approach and valuing more egalitarian processes [24,72]. SeedChange has thus articulated a feminist agroecology approach that emphasizes women's leadership and organizing, decision-making and access to productive resources, and addressing inequality by working with both women and men [73]. As noted in SeedChange's unpublished background paper on international partnerships, there is interest in being "guided by feminist approaches that centre the people most vulnerable to the negative impacts of patriarchal systems [...] and recognize how patriarchy intersects and exacerbates other types of inequality and oppression—hence also the reason to understand local, anti-racist and anti-colonial feminist struggles" as well as visibilizing the distinct struggles and contributions of 2SLGBTQQIAP+ people [74].

As part of SeedChange's feminist approach, a recently launched project called Rural Women Cultivating Change (RWCC) supported by Global Affairs Canada, engages with seven partners in three East African countries to implement three main objectives: strengthen women's leadership roles in local, regional and national contexts; support the prevention and mitigation of sexual- and gender-based violence; and contribute to women's access to productive resources and agroecological production and marketing. Local partners consist of women's rights organizations and agroecology organizations based in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia. Project design, planning and implementation of RWCC follows a collaborative approach where partners co-lead the activities. To ensure ongoing collaboration, the program was set up with a "gender equality and inclusion working group" that includes key staff from each partner organization. Collectively, they work to guide the overarching priorities of addressing gender equality through a transformative process, where both the structural and individual barriers and opportunities are identified and addressed throughout the project. Collaborative project implementation also aims to provide spaces for peer-to-peer learning between women's rights and food sovereignty groups in each country and to establish long-term foundational networking for feminist agroecology practice. For example, partner representatives in the working group discuss their own organizational limitations and opportunities while also learning from other partners' experience. The working group continues to identify learning opportunities while also addressing gaps in policy, staffing, and financial opportunities.

Staff consulted for this paper confirmed that recent reflections and learning on partnerships and localization have been meaningful, but also brought up several observations on the limitations, tensions and gaps. These include: (1) Time-sensitive administrative needs to meet funder requirements often shape interactions and take precedence over more respectful processes and shared decision-making; (2) Contradictory aspects exist in our work at all levels as an NGO, and there is often insufficient time or priority given to attempt to address these contradictions; (3) Sharing power is our responsibility and actions are more

important than words; and (4) We must ensure meaningful ways to genuinely discuss these issues with partners. They also reaffirmed that food sovereignty and agroecology provide important guiding principles to share power and prioritize community-led approaches. There is a high level of interest in learning from the new collaboration with women's rights organizations, to co-create feminist methodologies and learn how feminist approaches can help strengthen actions both in work on the ground and in partnership relationships.

4. Conclusions

This paper has looked at how calls for the localization and decolonization of aid and development are encouraging deeper listening to feminist, Indigenous, anti-racism and global South perspectives and social movements. A commitment to localization requires identifying and working to address inequality in partnership relationships between global North and South organizations. As noted in the discussions among NGOs and studies on localization and decolonizing aid, there is a need for NGOs in the global North to deeply listen to partners and allies, critically question assumptions, and share control over resources and decision-making processes. This would help to strengthen dialogue and equitable processes for the collaborative creation of programs and joint policy advocacy guided by local knowledge and priorities.

Applying the lens of localization to food systems indicates the critical need for food sovereignty approaches. It is crucial to shine light on how the dominant agricultural development model is leading to increased inequality and environmental and health crises, and how these disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Technology transfer approaches have proven problematic for agrobiodiverse Indigenous and smallholder systems around the world. In contrast, agroecology requires community-led methods. Working with food sovereignty and agroecology principles can thus strengthen the processes and outcomes of international solidarity work and programs for sustainable agriculture and food systems.

In the case of SeedChange's international work, learning from partners in the Seeds of Survival program, led to changes which eventually resulted in the adoption of agroecology and food sovereignty as frameworks for programs and policy advocacy. These, in turn, have further influenced the organization's interest in localization, recognizing that partners and community groups are the main experts, while SeedChange's role is to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, seek funding for partners' work, and support international policy advocacy. In summary, food sovereignty and agroecology (1) provided an alternative to problematic development concepts, and (2) encouraged localization and greater priority to global South perspectives. Working with women's rights organizations—supporting the important links between agroecology and feminist movements through collaborative project design, planning and implementation—is currently strengthening the use of feminist approaches at SeedChange. However, important contradictions and setbacks to material actions for change exist, and working to resolve these will require commitment and ongoing reflexivity and learning informed by partners' perspectives.

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Notes

- 1 For these reasons, neo-Marxist critiques situated development as the continued expansion of capitalism [2] (p. 158).
- 2 Cooperation Canada notes that this legislation limits work with marginalized groups, is “imbued in racial and ethnocentric bias” and “hinders equitable and effective partnerships” [13]. There are efforts underway to amend the legislation (see [13]).
- 3 The participants responded to an open invitation to participate in one of three workshops. The lead author emphasized there was no obligation to participate. Written consent was obtained by email after the consultation. The individuals consulted received a copy of the draft article before the workshop and subsequent versions for their review and feedback as well.
- 4 See <https://cooperation.ca/canadian-food-security-policy-group/>, accessed on 15 June 2022.
- 5 For example, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD 1992), International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture of the Food and Agriculture Organization (ITPGRFA 2001), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP 2018).
- 6 Reducing public spending and the privatization of public utilities and services, as well as increasing raw exports and foreign investment were key aspects of structural adjustment programs prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in exchange for assistance with debt financing in global South countries beginning in the 1980s [35].
- 7 See as an example, FAO’s Agroecology Knowledge Hub website, <https://www.fao.org/agroecology/overview/en/>, accessed on 15 June 2022.
- 8 Renowned Cree activist-scholar Priscilla Settee joined the board in 2017 and recommended SeedChange include more Indigenous directors.
- 9 See for example a 1975 video featuring food aid in Lesotho and Bangladesh (<https://youtu.be/LZ6b3VW4vC0>, accessed on 15 June 2022).
- 10 See for example, a 1988 video featuring projects in various countries (<https://youtu.be/iIg7zMkFRqI>, accessed on 15 June 2022).
- 11 SeedChange. What is Food Sovereignty (<https://weseedchange.org/food-sovereignty/>, accessed on 15 June 2022).
- 12 For example, the SeedChange website states: “We always deliver our international programs in partnership because we strongly believe in local leadership and building the capacity of local civil society organizations to support their communities. Our decision to engage in a country or region rests on our ability to find a local partner organization that shares our values of food sovereignty, social justice and gender equality” [69].
- 13 The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security (<http://www.seedsecurity.ca/en/>, accessed on 15 June 2022).
- 14 Please see [70] and comments in “Collaborators and Supporters”, Northern Manitoba Food, Culture, and Community Collaborative (<http://www.nmfccc.ca/collaborators--supporters.html>, website consulted 10 June 2022).
- 15 Please see the Farmers for Climate Solutions website (<https://farmersforclimatesolutions.ca/>, accessed on 15 June 2022).
- 16 See for example, the Ban Terminator campaign with the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN), of which SeedChange is a member (<https://cban.ca/gmos/issues/terminator-technology/>, accessed on 15 June 2022).

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