

# Backgrounder

**Gender; Monitoring, evaluation and learning**

*Keywords:*

Capacity building, gender justice, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex (LGBTQI+)

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LIYANG

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Credit: May Thazin Aung/IIED



IIED partnered with the Liyang network in the Philippines to learn how they work with fisher communities fighting development that threatens livelihoods.

## Rethinking capacity building

*Traditional capacity building approaches have global Northern biases. Learning from grassroots social movements can help deconstruct these biases*

Development organisations in the global North consistently grapple with how they can decolonise the way they work and better integrate gender and intersectionality perspectives into their programmes. IIED has recently been taking strides to bring these lenses into the work that we do. We have reflected on how to centre gender and intersectionality within climate action,<sup>1</sup> explored how we can tackle power asymmetries in our partnerships,<sup>2</sup> and examined how queer theory and practice can enable more equitable and inclusive development.<sup>3</sup>

### Problematising capacity building

IIED is now also using gender, intersectionality and decoloniality lenses to examine the concept and approach behind capacity building. These lenses allow us to challenge existing biases and assumptions within development while shedding light on marginalised perspectives. For instance, from LGBTQI+ groups, queer thinking and practice enables us to challenge 'normal' practices and assumptions behind capacity building activities and programmes.<sup>4</sup>

### KEY TERMS

- **Decolonisation:** a process of 'delinking' ourselves from Western or global North knowledge structures and reshaping the way we "think, speak and live" to undo the effects of colonisation.<sup>5</sup> These effects include cultural impacts, such as the influence of religion (for example, Christianity). They could be psychological impacts where certain values and beliefs — such as individualism and racial superiority/inferiority — remain in colonised peoples' mindsets as part of a colonial legacy. Decolonising ourselves, institutions or states is to question the colonial roots of our ideologies, power and positions of (dis)privilege.
- **Capacity building or capability building:** a development practice where the capacity of global South actors is supported through a range of collaborative actions and technical and educational investments. What is considered capacity building and how it is delivered within the development sector is determined by the politics of knowledge and power dynamics between different actors.

### WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

The ideas and practice related to traditional capacity building approaches need rethinking through gender, intersectionality and decoloniality lenses. Traditional capacity building approaches are biased, often undervaluing local knowledge and treating learning as a one-off transaction. By working with diverse, grassroots organisations in the global South, we can understand different models of learning and rethink approaches to capacity building.

Decoloniality and gender lenses can help us to understand the systems of patriarchy, colonialism, racism and capitalism that underlie these assumptions.

### Undervaluing local knowledge

Capacity building as a development practice assumes that global South actors lack the capacity to 'properly' do development. This assumption fails to recognise the importance of global South actors as experts on the contexts within which they work. It also undermines the value of traditional knowledge and lived experiences of local and Indigenous communities.

In traditional capacity building programmes, there is a bias towards promoting some types of knowledge over others. This includes technical knowledge and know-how from Northern 'experts' on the use of certain technologies, for example, climate-smart agriculture technologies. Similarly, Northern governance structures are often prioritised in capacity-building agendas. This displaces other types of knowledge, such as local actors' knowledge of their cultural, political and ecological landscapes passed down through generations and learned through lived experiences.

### Learning as a long-term process

Capacity-building practices or approaches are often transactional and one-off in nature, failing to invest in the long-term process of learning. Capacity building workshops or training events are sometimes too short term, with one-off training sessions delivered by a Northern expert to Southern actors during a workshop or conference lasting only a few days. This practice undermines the nature of learning as an iterative and collaborative process where knowledge is collectively shared and built upon over time.

### Learning with partners

In 2023, the Gender Equality Champions Network, an internal IIED working group, initiated a project to explore more decolonised and gender-sensitive approaches to capacity building. Our objective is to build awareness and document different ways of capacity building through working with diverse groups of feminist and queer grassroots organisations and social movements.

IIED is working with the Liyang network,<sup>6</sup> an environmental organisation with a membership primarily comprised of Indigenous and queer grassroots representatives based in the Philippines. The Liyang network seeks to represent marginalised voices in society, identifying colonial legacies as one of the drivers of oppression. In working with them, we sought to understand and document different ways of learning and doing capacity building.

Through our collaboration with the Liyang network, we were able to capture some of the unique ways of working that grassroots social movements use to build solidarity with their members and local communities. In turn, we were able to reflect on our ways of working, and explore ways to develop more flexible and patient operating approaches that enable more collaborative and trusting partnerships with grassroots organisations.

### Looking ahead

This work is expected to inform different ways of working with partners and building capabilities within IIED. We hope to use learning from this work to share more gender-sensitive and decolonised approaches to capacity building with development donors, practitioners and grassroots organisations interested in decoloniality, gender and intersectionality. If you are interested in learning more about this work or have learnings to share with us, please contact May Thazin Aung: [maythazinaung@iied.org](mailto:maythazinaung@iied.org)



### Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

### SOUTHERN VOICES

*Decolonial capacity building must be from the people to the people. In our context, the most marginalised rural and indigenous communities, including women and LGBTQ+, hold deep local knowledge from their struggle for land and environmental rights over many generations — especially in resistance to colonialism. Unfortunately, their local knowledge has long been invalidated by global North countries because it poses a threat to those who benefit from the plunder of the peoples' natural wealth and resources. Genuine people-powered sustainable development is central to decolonisation since 'development' by global North countries is often used to maintain and justify the underdevelopment of global South countries and their status as a neo-colony beholden to foreign dictates.*

— Member, Liyang Network, The Philippines

The Liyang Network is a local-to-global advocacy network that amplifies the calls to action of grassroots communities in the Philippines, including the Lumad land defenders in Mindanao and other environmental and human rights defenders throughout the country.

<sup>1</sup> Kajumba, T and Shakya C (19 May 2021) Putting gender, intersectionality and social justice at the centre of transformative responses to climate change. <https://bit.ly/3TnUMjv>

<sup>2</sup> Kajumba, T (ed.) (2023) Exploring equity in partnerships: lessons from five case studies. IIED, London. [www.iied.org/21861iied](http://www.iied.org/21861iied)

<sup>3</sup> IIED, What does queer have to do with it? [www.iied.org/what-does-queer-have-do-it](http://www.iied.org/what-does-queer-have-do-it)

<sup>4</sup> Aung, MT (21 September 2023) Queering climate justice – what climate justice can learn from queer groups. <https://bit.ly/3wMWemP>

<sup>5</sup> Tsang, M (21 January 2021) Decolonial? Postcolonial? What does it mean to 'decolonise ourselves'? <https://bit.ly/3wSbMpa>

<sup>6</sup> The Liyang Network. [www.liyangnetwork.org](http://www.liyangnetwork.org)

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### FIND OUT MORE

Our work on rethinking knowledge exchange is being undertaken by IIED's Gender Equality Champions Group. This group drives our efforts to integrate gender justice throughout IIED's work. Find out more about our work on intersectionality and decoloniality at [www.iied.org/gender](http://www.iied.org/gender) and [www.iied.org/what-does-queer-have-do-it](http://www.iied.org/what-does-queer-have-do-it)

