Setting an agenda for decolonisation of global health research

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The decolonisation debate has become increasingly prominent in the global health arena over the last few years creating opportunities for dialogue, learning and change. There has been long-standing criticism of the power imbalances in global health, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further illuminated these inequities. Decolonization questions deep-rooted, conceptual assumptions and practices, and calls for change.

The Decolonisation and Global Health Research Exchange Network is a multidisciplinary group of academics, practitioners, and activists with a shared interest in unpacking decolonisation debates in health research and broader knowledge practices. The aim of this focus is to contribute to a research and action agenda for positive transformation in the field. Through a set of dialogues and exchanges, we seek to deconstruct and reflect on the elements of the global health research eco-system, trigger thinking that creates space for a radically different health research praxis, and propose some actionable steps towards a decolonised global health future.

As a first step, we mapped out some key constituents of the global health research chain that could be targeted for focused action. This mapping was intended to serve as a starting agenda for deeper reflection on the structures, actors, processes, and practices in place, and to identify potential actions for transformation. Five key health research domains were identified: 1) funding and programmes; 2) knowledge production processes; 3) knowledge dissemination; 4) knowledge uptake and use; and 5) education and training. While acknowledging some positive changes across these domains in recent times, the network takes a bolder approach to decolonisation in challenging the raison d’etre of existing structures and processes, and in seeing agency not only as a dismantling process but also an opportunity to imagine and create a different future. While emerging propositions may not always be realizable within the current global health eco-system, they may trigger processes that lead to futures that have not been imagined. The structural shifts required for decolonisation demand radical approaches in addition to reformatory stepwise actions. Although it may be challenging to determine the right balance between these approaches, it is clear that they are both essential in the decolonisation journey.