HOUSE OF COMMONS

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: The Philosophy and Culture of Aid, HC 101

Tuesday 25 May 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 May 2021.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Mrs Pauline Latham (Chair); Brendan Clarke-Smith; Navendu Mishra; Kate Osamor; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 79 - 101

Witnesses

I: Degan Ali, Executive Director, Adeso; and Dr Lata Narayanaswamy, Associate Professor, Politics of Global Development, University of Leeds.

II: Natalie Lartey, Advocacy and Engagement Manager, Communications, International Institute for Environment and Development; and Lorriann Robinson, Founder and Director, The Advocacy Team.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Degan Ali and Dr Lata Narayanaswamy.

Q79 **Chair:** Welcome to the first evidence session on the philosophy and culture of aid: racism in the aid sector. This evidence session is focused on how racism manifests itself across the aid sector and we will explore ideas about how to increase diversity and inclusion in staffing. Before the Committee begins its questions, can the witnesses introduce themselves?

Dr Narayanaswamy: Thank you for the invitation to be a witness to the Committee. I am an associate professor in the politics of global development in the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds in the UK.

Degan Ali: Thank you for having me. I am the executive director of Adeso, which is a local organisation based in Kenya, Nairobi.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming. I know that you have said you are very happy to talk openly about racism in the aid sector, but if there is something you are not comfortable with and you want to follow it up in writing to the Committee, please feel free to do that. We are very pleased to have any additional evidence. I am now going to pass over to Kate Osamor for the first question.

Q80 **Kate Osamor:** My first question is to Dr Lata. What role has colonialism played in shaping the aid sector today?

Dr Narayanaswamy: Thank you so much for this question. It is a foundational one, so I am glad that it is the first one you have gone with. Reflecting on colonialism is about using our shared history as a way of embracing a more diversified way of understanding our world. For me, this is about starting more honest conversations about the world that we are in and understanding the ways in which the colonial enterprise has shaped that world.

The starting point for me is to confront head-on the continued equivocation that we see in our public discourse, in our national curriculum, about the relative good and bad of empire. So the story goes, well, there was violence, yes, slavery was not so good, land expropriation not so good, but at least there were railways and there was good governance and the gift of democracy. The difficulty is that that continued equivocation is part of why talking about race, and particularly in the context of the aid sector, has become such a challenge.

I want to focus on three things that I think are important in looking at how colonialism has shaped aid today. The first is that if we start with thinking about trade, this is European empires but the focus on the British empire is valuable because it was one of the largest in history. It brought increasing numbers of territories into the orbit of European but British ownership in particular. This has ended up in the context of our modern world leading to large trade imbalances, because the starting

point of what became decolonised countries was very different. We need to be able to confront the ways in which trade imbalances that we see now have their roots in that colonial era.

The second thing is around the slavery, land expropriation and resource extraction, which all served imperial interests of wealth accumulation. We must not underestimate how much was taken out of what we now call very loosely the developing world or the global south and the ways in which those also have their roots in empire.

What we have particularly come together to talk about today, which interacts with those other two areas that I talked about, of course, is racism. The idea that brown and black bodies are incapable of "culture" or "civilisation" or lack self-control was all part of the science of eugenics that flourished as part of the justification for empire.

One of the things that I am very keen that we are able to talk about collectively is that colonialism then should become not just the story of black and brown others living in places distant from Europe and North America. That is one of the challenges as well, which is that we think about colonialism as history, it happened a long time ago and even in the context of how it plays out in our lives. Now, in some ways in our context we talk about minoritized bodies but also those people who are far away. If we think about things like Red Nose Day and my own children coming home from school with their red noses, it is always about Africa and Africa is poor, but we never think about why that is. That is a function of a colonial legacy and my hope is that this conversation will lead us to reconsider how colonialism is not just about brown and black bodies in distant places; it is our story. It is all of our story; all of the ways in which all of us live and how colonialism has shaped our lives; the reason why racial hierarchies continue to influence how we live our lives. It is our story, our shared story. We must recognise the continuities in how the world works today.

A quick way to summarise key concerns around colonialism is to try to draw out the continuities or the legacies of empire and the ways in which they shape the system within which aid is deployed, because that is what we have come together to talk about. It is not just colonialism among us, although that is useful, but thinking about how we engage with aid, which is one of the elements of global Britain.

Aid as we know it is, in fact, an extension of the colonial system, very often implemented by redeploying colonial-era officers as technical development officers, who then went on to shape the system in senior posts at what are now known as the Bretton Woods institutions, so this is the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, UN specialist agencies. Those people who were the administrators for colonialism were redeployed as technical development officers, so there was a real continuity in the way in which colonialism was administered and then how aid was subsequently administered. It was very often the same people.

What does all of this mean now? For some scholars when we think about, say, the SDGs, and there is a commitment in there to free and fair trade, the challenge, of course, is that it is very difficult when the free trade policies that are avowed by the Bretton Woods institutions start by disavowing the history of imperialism and the fact that a lot of the world has been incorporated into the global trading system on highly unequal terms. That is the first thing.

The other more important thing for the purposes of our conversation today that I would like to draw your attention to is that it has created enduring perceptions of brown and black bodies that are incapable of self-governance and need external guidance. Our aid becomes a form of charity and of benevolence. If we look at the history of this, it is a continuity of a colonial legacy itself. What we had was effectively the colonial enterprise itself, the way we talk about it, turned on its head. Now the story we tell ourselves about this history is that instead of imperialism being the story of occupation, violence and displacement empire itself, because we equivocate about the good and bad, it is understood as benevolent and emancipatory, supporting primitive black and brown others, through the imperial gifts of railways, governance systems and common languages, to become "civilised". The success of this is measured by the capacity of these brown and black bodies who were considered savages at that time to liberate themselves from colonialism by using these gifts.

What ended up happening was that independence from colonialism was seen as a gift of the colonisers because they had earned the right to govern themselves by gifts provided by the colonisers, and this turns colonialism on its head and British colonialism. Aid then becomes an extension of that logic because aid continues to be undertaken at least partly as a form of charity that is directed at brown and black bodies who are seen as incapable of governing themselves.

Chair: Excuse me. I am really sorry, but we have six questions and we only have 45 minutes, so could we move on to the next section of this question about the future? Kate, do you want to carry on with the question?

Q81 **Kate Osamor:** Thank you, Chair. I was going to say, Dr Lata, you have answered a few of the questions I was going to ask you. Thank you so much. You have spoken about colonialism; you have spoken about the impact it has on communities. I wanted to ask you quite briefly what impact this power across the aid sector has on those who receive aid.

Dr Narayanaswamy: It is an important question. The problem is that what that does is it concentrates power with us, basically, and here the one thing I want to draw out is the way in which we talk about race. The difficulty with racism in the aid sector is it tends to make whiteness invisible. Here I do want to draw a distinction between whiteness as a structural power issue, rather than white people, which is about blame, which is about individualising, which is about suggesting it is something

that white people have done. This is very unhelpful, and it is very contradictory to the solidarity that we might want to build in this sector, in terms of thinking about how we tackle racism.

This is much more about thinking about how power is distributed. I appreciate your question because if we control the money and we think about the accountability that aid has to, say, British taxpayers, which is how it is framed, then in fact the power relations tend to be very lopsided. Even though we talk about partnership and inclusion and we want our overseas development assistance money to be managed or driven by development priorities from the global south, it is still very top-down. It is something that I think we need to talk openly, honestly and inclusively about—questions of racism and also the power that we have, so I do not take myself out of that. I am still in that construction. I want to be on the side that challenges power, but I am relatively a part of that structure. I am a northern academic, I am based in the UK, so this is about reflecting on ourselves collectively; this is not about blame. Part of that is acknowledging our own power collectively in that space, but I think it is absolutely top-down because of that legacy.

Q82 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Good afternoon, everybody. This is a question for Degan Ali, on the subject of power that we were just talking about. Who would you say typically holds the power to direct the policies, the investment and the programming that shape people's lives?

Degan Ali: That is a good question. I would say that the power is exclusively held in the hands of the donors, so who holds the purse strings. That power then has a domino effect, so if your donor is the UN that FCDO has given funding to, then it holds the power at the country level. If it then gives funding to an INGO, then it holds the power at the country level, and so on. The relationships are skewed, and the community has almost no power. Local organisations have no power. They are treated as second-class citizens in this structure.

I am not sure if you are aware, but when the Grand Bargain was first discussed and it was signed, only 0.2% of humanitarian funding globally—the $25 billion, $26 billion, it varies every year—of funding that goes from all the OECD member countries and other donors went directly from the donor to a local civil society organisation, them being the last mile representative of the communities, closest to the communities, understanding the context of the communities. Only 0.2%. The Grand Bargain ambition said that FCDO, USCID, all of these donors were going to get that raised to 25%. We are now five years later and that has failed. We have not done that. That is one manifestation of power dynamics that has still not been resolved. It is where the resources are going and the level of intermediation that exists between the donor and the local communities. There are several layers of intermediation.

Secondly, how it manifests itself is the narrative, this idea that black and brown people in the global south, going back to this history of colonialism and racism and how it manifests itself, where local organisations in

Africa, Indonesia, and the Philippines are automatically high risk. They have a risk of fraud, a risk of corruption, they need capacity building.

Let us also note that 90% of the last mile delivery of all the FCDO funding is done by local organisations in these countries, so if they are so high risk why are you trusting them to do 90% of the delivery? There is this idea that you are reducing that risk by having this level of intermediation, assuming that all these intermediaries are not high risk in any way, that corruption and compliance issues, mismanagement, none of this happens. We all know for a fact particularly in conflict settings that these things happen for all actors. It is not just local organisations. It happens in INGOs, it happens in UN actors, but the narrative is that it is exclusive and synonymous with local actors. This is part of this racist narrative that local organisations are high risk, they always need capacity development, but we have been capacity-built for 67 years and we are never at the level where we can meet your definitions of being low risk.

Also our understanding of the context, the communities, our networks that resolve many of the security challenges that international NGOs, UN NGOs, have in navigating these very difficult environments like Yemen and Somalia, are not valued. There is no value set on that. There is no monetary value set on that. It is not even visible in any kind of due diligence assessments when we are rated as high risk. We must completely shift our understanding of risk and our understanding of who has value. This idea of value for money, let us redefine value for money in a way that is antiracist and anticolonialist and puts the communities and local organisations closest to the communities at the forefront.

Q83 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Thank you. You have answered part of a second question, which was basically this local knowledge that you were describing, the local communities and civil society organisations, and whether they have been playing a sufficient role in designing that development programming. I suppose from what you have just said that is a bit of an issue at the moment.

Degan Ali: Yes, it is a major issue. They are completely invisible in terms of power and relationships. We are invisible in all decision-making forums that the international community has, whether it is the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, whether it was the Grand Bargain negotiations, the Sherpa group. We are not in leadership positions at the clusters, the UN cluster systems, at the national levels, the humanitarian country teams. Can you imagine people coming from Nepal, speaking Nepalese, coming to the UK to support the UK citizens and saying that all meetings that happen in the UK must be run in the Nepalese language and that British citizens do not get access to these meetings, that you have to have a special kind of relationship? If you are a citizen and you want to go into your school board and protest or have questions for the school board you have full access, but if you are a citizen in Somalia and you want to go into these UN co-ordination meetings you do not have full access. It is not accessible to the communities; you have no way of giving your

feedback. On top of that they use jargon in a foreign language, so imagine that happening every single day in your country. This is what happens to people in the global south countries when aid comes to them.

The worst part of it is not even the marginalisation of the communities; it is not even the marginalisation of the civil society. It is the further marginalisation of national Governments who are the duty-bearers, who are supposed to be the responsible entities for their citizens. They are fully marginalised. For 30 years in Somalia, where I am from, there has been no investment in developing the infrastructure for the Government to be leading in the response. I feel that local INGOs and the UN do not want the Government to have capacity, do not want them to have sovereignty, do not want them to have the level of capacity where they start dictating the terms and conditions of what kind of aid they want in their countries. They are happy with the free-for-all that has existed for 30 years. I think that is the worst marginalisation when we undercut and ensure that national and local Governments do not have the authority, power and technical capacity to lead on a response.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Thank you very much for that. That is very enlightening.

Q84 **Navendu Mishra:** Thanks to both panellists for joining us. Could I go to Dr Narayanaswamy first, please? How open is the aid sector to having conversations about racism?

Dr Narayanaswamy: I would say it is changing across a number of institutions, both my own institution and higher education more widely, and I say that because I do think higher education is a part of the aid sector. We have been recipients of the Global Challenges Research Fund. We have to speak to overseas development aid guidance, so ODA concerns in how we shape our research, and I have been involved in quite a lot of that.

As part of that we are all reflecting on ourselves. I have also been involved in those conversations with non-academic partners, development NGO colleagues working in the sector. I would say that has changed since last summer. Today is the tragic anniversary of George Floyd's murder, so in a way it is fitting that we are having this conversation today. That was a tragedy and Derek Chauvin has been convicted, but what we want then is to think about what action comes from that. I think that did act as a catalyst. It is a tragedy, but it acted as a catalyst for that conversation to be held in lots of organisations.

The thing I want to highlight as a potential—maybe "danger" is a strong word, but a risk maybe, is that the risk here is that there is an overemphasis on a shallow representational criteria, so what we end up with is a diversity quota that means that we aim for some proportion of people of colour included in any event or place or plan we inhabit. That is very good—

Q85 **Navendu Mishra:** Forgive me for interrupting. Do you mean a sort of tick-box exercise where in brochures or websites you have a brown or a black person? Is that what you mean?

Dr Narayanaswamy: Yes, absolutely, so thinking about moving beyond just a tick box, yes, okay, we have one black person, we have two brown women, this sort of thing. That is important, do not get me wrong. Important things can happen if we start to think carefully about diversity, so it is not to undermine those sorts of activities or efforts. I think that they are well meaning, but it is not enough. It cannot be an end in itself.

We need to think more widely about how we also diversify ideas. We must look at the message and the messenger, so thinking about who is in the room and what should be driving how we answer that question are those fundamental issues around power relations. I think again you have done a remarkable job in highlighting some of the contradictions in that space; for instance, about access to what should be local spaces but because they are international organisations local people are excluded. This would seem to go against a lot of the efforts that have been undertaken, for instance, around localisation. These have racialised elements that then tick-box exercises are not enough. They are important. I am not suggesting we should not be thinking about that, but we need to be thinking in a much more constructive and dynamic way about what diversity means. Diversity of what? People, yes, but diversity of ideas? Think about the power relations in the room, whose knowledge counts, whose voices count. Power also plays out.

Degan made an excellent point about language. We always communicate in English. This is an issue very close to my heart. I am struck by the fact that I get invited to all sorts of spaces and communicate with all sorts of people and there is never any pressure on me to speak anything other than English. I have an absurd amount of privilege because I do speak English so that is a way in which I understand that I have power in context that then maybe I have a position of power relative to other people, even though I might tick a box, if I can be so blunt, because I do. I am a brown woman so I might tick a box, but that underestimates the way in which I am also a holder of power myself. I have an academic position; I speak English.

We need to be careful about how we position people. The other thing to mention on that very quickly is that if we only do diversity in that tick-box way it is reductive and it reinforces a racialised lens through which we might look at these sorts of issues. I would not want to be reduced to my race. I would like to think I have something else to offer. We need to be careful.

I think the sector is having those conversations. I think we are moving in that direction. I am sure Degan would have things to say about that as well, but I think we need to move faster, and I think we need to move farther.

Q86 **Navendu Mishra:** Thank you. I will come back to you in a moment. We are very pressed for time. Ms Ali, would you like to come in on this, about how open the sector is to having conversations about racism?

Degan Ali: In 2019 I was interviewed in *Devex* and I talked about my experiences with racism in the sector. I have been using the R word for a long time and calling it out for what it is. It has never been received positively. People have always been defensive, and I think there is a problem. There is a problem because people think that people who go into this charitable sector are good people, they have good intentions and somehow good people cannot bring their racist systems, they cannot bring their baggage; it is just somehow they are removed from what happens domestically. If you come to my country in Somalia and you are a white person, you do not have any of those kinds of things because you are a good person who has sacrificed a nice life, good living standards back home in London or somewhere else in the UK, and because of your sacrifice obviously you cannot be racist, obviously you are not participating in a system that is racist. That article was not received very well by many white, male donors in the sector in Somalia. I was blacklisted and my organisation was blacklisted from funding because of my willingness to call this out.

I would say things have changed dramatically since the death of George Floyd and Covid. We are having these conversations, but I am not seeing any real change in the system. I think my worry is that we end up doing a lot of diversity exercises and putting black and brown people in leadership roles, but the institutions and how they function are not changing.

The second point I would like to talk about is that the history of colonialism means, as Lata has said, that aid rests on the shoulders fully of these neo-colonial structures that were put there by design to keep our countries in poverty. The World Trade Organisation, the UN Security Council, how the veto power rests in the hands of five countries, how UNICEF is always led by an American, WFP is led by an American, UN OCHA is led by the British. All of these things are part of the dynamics of post-colonialism and they were there by design. We do not need aid. We need a level playing field in terms of the trade policies that allow us to compete with Europe and the US. The Europeans come as a bloc and negotiate. How is it that a small country like Burkina Faso is going to negotiate trade deals with China and with the EU? Is that a fair level playing field? It is not.

Then you have west African countries that are producers of cocoa and they never produce high-quality chocolate for export to Europe and the US. This is by design. It is not by accident that we are a source of extraction and raw materials. The west does not want Africa and some Asian countries to develop and become a source of industrialisation and exporting their products.

The third thing is how we are complicit, the aid sector, in that you have a drought in Malawi. Why is there a drought in Malawi and a hunger crisis in Malawi? It is because the IMF and the World Bank forced the Malawian Government post-colonialism to remove all their food subsidies and their food reserves that they had in plenty for their citizens. The west, Europe and America, still have food subsidies in plethora, but we in Africa are not allowed to have those food subsidies. A drought happens, the FCDO funds Save the Children and UNICEF or Oxfam to do a food security project or a hunger or nutrition project in Malawi. What are we doing? Are we solving poverty? Are we really solving the root cause of the problem? No, we are not. We are just providing a band-aid and we need to understand that the root cause of these problems lies in the policies, the global governance systems and the unfair terms that exist with the WTO, with the IMF, with the World Bank and with the UN. That is where the heart of impoverishment and hunger lies, not in aid dollars or pounds to UN agencies.

Q87 **Navendu Mishra:** Forgive me for interrupting. It is really important, the point you made about root causes of poverty and the imbalance of power in the negotiations between the smaller countries and larger trading blocs. I will come back to you.

My second question has been answered, and I know we are very pressed for time and the Chair is looking worried. I will ask you to be brief, please. I have two remaining questions, but please have brief conversations. The Chair also made it clear that if you have anything additional that you want to submit, the Committee is more than happy to receive it in writing. Please do not feel that you are being timed out of this conversation. The Committee is always keen to receive written correspondence in addition.

If I go to Dr Narayanaswamy for this question, how does the approach to tackling racism differ between donors, multilateral organisations, large NGOs, small NGOs and the private sector firms? If you could be brief, please. I apologise.

Dr Narayanaswamy: Not at all. Thank you for the question. I think the biggest challenge is probably a shared one. I am not sure there is anything that would distinguish across different sectoral types. I think at the moment it is probably the challenge of defensiveness. What we end up with is reporting that is being done in good faith; it is not to undermine the genuine commitment of so many people I meet who really want to do this well. Again, Degan made that point really well. It goes back to the structures that you come up against, the dangers of wanting to be more ambitious, but you come up against the structures of power that do not allow you to adapt to new ways of working and thinking. Certainly, that has race elements—who is in the room, who is not in the room, who does or does not have a voice.

We are now in a position where on the back of the Black Lives Matter protests and the response across all the different sectors that you named,

what we are getting is almost the pressure to report positively, "This is what we are doing. We have done that. We have done this. We have produced a race audit" and again those are good things. It is important. Let us have those conversations; that is wonderful, but the point I would make is that antiracism is not an outcome. It is a process and it is a continuous process. We must keep doing it. We must keep asking ourselves those questions, and I do not have a magic bullet. It is about the time. If I had one thing I would want the Committee to take away, it would be that we should collectively be setting realistic, concrete goals and be honest about when and how we are going to deliver on them. This is not going to get solved tomorrow. We are all asking the right questions, but let us be honest about what the answer entails. The difficult conversations that we have to have, let us have them.

That is the difficulty now, in response to your question, about what across those sectors is the challenge. It is to find solutions quickly so that maybe we can go and talk about something else. It is not an outcome; it is a process.

Q88 **Navendu Mishra:** Thank you. Ms Ali, this is quite a broad question and I appreciate that, but we are pressured for time. How do you define racism in the aid sector and what are the core principles? I think you have covered some of this in your previous answer with regard to the imbalance of power and someone from abroad perhaps coming into Somalia, and the power dynamics there. Could you address how you define racism in the aid sector?

Degan Ali: That is a really broad question. Maybe I can answer it by how it manifests itself, rather than a definition. I think we all know what the definition of racism is, but not just in power dynamics, not only in the white saviour complex, it also manifests itself in the financing mechanisms, in the co-ordination mechanisms, in the narrative and the lexicon that we use and how we cover crises. When the crisis happens and you open up *The Guardian* or *The Daily Mail* do they talk about what local people are doing to respond to the crisis, what the local private sector is doing, what civil society has already done, or do they only feature the UN or the British INGO that has come to save us in the Philippines or wherever it may be? That is what is covered. I think it is a combination of all of these things plus, as I said, the structural racism in global governance institutions that are designed to ensure that the west and the colonisers still maintain their position of hegemony and power. I would say all of that is how it manifests itself.

Q89 **Navendu Mishra:** Thank you. Dr Narayanaswamy, would you like to contribute to this question, defining racism in the aid sector, and what the core principles are?

Dr Narayanaswamy: I think Degan has said it well and I know we are pressed for time, so I will leave it at that, but thank you for asking.

Q90 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** Racism is very close to my heart and both the

panellists are delivering a powerful message, very impressive, but in view of the time we cannot go far on that. I am sure we will look at how best we can engage with them in the future. My question is to Degan Ali first. What three actions should the UK Government take to combat racism in the aid sector?

Degan Ali: I would say first to revisit your role in the global governance systems. Be a genuine ally in ensuring that global south countries develop and have a fair level playing field in how the rules are designed, which right now are not fair. Will the UK Government ever be an ally in removal of veto power? Can we ever see it happening, that the UN Security Council will reform and will they be willing to give up their veto power? I cannot see that happening, but that would be an amazing thing that I would love to see you as parliamentarians pushing the UK Government to be part of, part of that movement, and leading that movement with the other five members.

I would love to see the FCDO and how it functions completely revamped in terms of addressing some of these power dynamics, at minimum meeting the 25% Grand Bargain commitment. I am holding them accountable to meet that. The FCDO has made a commitment and it needs to follow through on its commitment. Saying, "INGO X or UN Y has met that commitment as a proxy indicator for us meeting that commitment" is not satisfactory.

How much money has FCDO passed on directly to local organisations on the ground? That is what they need to do and they need to figure out how to support the revamping of these structures.

I would say third is FCDO and your aid architecture as the UK Government needs to have an opportunity for training on power and bias of your staff. I have met some really great FCDO staff who understand these issues and who come to us with humility and want to support and let us lead, but I have met many who have extreme the typical white male saviour complex with arrogance and think they have all the answers and never want to listen. There must be a real process of inducting the new staff, civil servants, into your aid architecture and doing the proper training of them.

Mr Virendra Sharma: Lata, would you like to add anything?

Dr Narayanaswamy: Yes, thank you for the opportunity to do that. I agree with everything that Degan has said. I want to add that as an educator and a researcher I would like the UK Government to take the lead on having a constructive public dialogue around the colonial legacy. This is overdue.

There has been a petition that went to Parliament—I know because I signed it—about revamping the educational curriculum. I have a child doing GCSE history and I am struck by the gaps in that education. Without wanting to draw too much attention to it, it is worth

acknowledging that the public debate around colonialism in this country is deeply polarised, and for me this is a real shame because it need not be. This is not about holding individuals to account; this is not about blame. The history has happened. It is done. Empire happened.

What these conversations that people like myself and Degan and so many of our colleagues and peers are trying to achieve is for there to be an honest reckoning with what that means for us now, and not just one or two of us and not just brown and black people but everybody. That does not have to be a damaging conversation. Acknowledging those colonial legacies, so some colleagues have said maybe an independent commission, truth and reconciliation, something that allows us to acknowledge that we have a shared colonial past and how to understand the ways in which those historical legacies play out for us today. That is at the heart of racism. Unless we contend with the past honestly and understand those legacies today we are never going to tackle racism in the future. That is what I truly believe and I think that conversation is possible. I think conversations like what the Committee is facilitating make that possible, but we must work out how we widen that conversation.

Mr Virendra Sharma: Thank you very much, Lata. For your information, I had three online meetings with academics like yourself and many other social activists on the decolonisation of the British curriculum, and you will be hearing from me very soon on this subject as you seem to know a lot better from practical experience than people like myself. We will be engaging. In view of the time, I do not think I will put any questions, but I will ask the Chair to take it over from here. Thank you very much. It is nice hearing you both.

Chair: Thank you, Virendra. Because of the timescale we did have another couple of questions and I think what we will do is we will write to you and ask you to send in your answers. One of them was a pretty important one about pay and remuneration, and it will be interesting to hear your views on that. We will ask you to put that in writing if that is okay with you.

It has been a fascinating session, so thank you very much for joining us. We will leave the questions that we did still have because of the timing, but thank you so much for joining us today. I think that we have all found it fascinating and very interesting and illuminating as the start of our look at racism in the aid sector.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Natalie Lartey and Lorriann Robinson.

Q91 **Chair:** We are now going to move on to the second panel with Lorriann Robinson and Natalie Lartey. Welcome to both of you. I am not very good with pronunciation of some names, so I apologise for that. Before we

start our questions, can each of you introduce yourselves and tell us where you are from and a bit of background?

Lorriann Robinson: Good afternoon. It is such a pleasure to be here. I am the founder and director of a political consultancy business called The Advocacy Team, and I am also a cofounder of an organisation called The Equity Index. The Equity Index is a social enterprise that is developing indicators to measure equity in the UK development sector.

Natalie Lartey: I work for the International Institute for Environment and Development. I have recently done quite a substantive piece of work with that institute. I worked with an academic and together we developed a framework that we have used to analyse our storytelling, our narratives and our knowledge products to get a better understanding of if or how they are reproducing racism.

Q92 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Good afternoon. This is a question that we asked the previous panel as well, to Natalie first, please. Natalie, how do you define racism in the aid sector and for you what are the core principles?

Natalie Lartey: Thanks for this question, Brendan. I would like to support the contributions from the previous panellists as they have shared their views on systemic racism. What I would like to add is that it is really important to understand that race as a concept, the idea of categorising people by their race, was invented to identify people who were superior or inferior. It was done to develop a social hierarchy. People at the top were white people, and we knew that their lives had value; people at the bottom, their lives were not valued. People at the top, their language, their culture, their knowledge was seen as valuable. They were seen as deserving of resources. People at the bottom, their languages, their culture, their knowledge were seen as inferior.

The very idea of race and having different races was developed to create this social hierarchy, with white people being superior at the top and black people being inferior at the bottom. That was done to allow slavery and colonialism to happen. Then what we saw is laws, rights, policies, financial flows, all being embedded in society systematically to maintain that social hierarchy where you have white people having access to some of the best resources and others not getting the same access.

Of all the places in the world, we know that that social hierarchy and systemic racism is having the most devastating impacts in global south countries, and black people and people of colour who live in their borders are affected. It is important to set that up as a foundation for our thinking on this.

With that in place, we know that that social hierarchy endures today and it defines who today has access to resources and power and who today is vulnerable to things like climate impacts, who is vulnerable to things like hunger and famine, who is vulnerable to having a partial or poor

education. We in the international development sector are supporting systemic racism when we are unable to acknowledge the role that racism and colonialism have played in fostering poverty and being a driver of poverty and these vulnerabilities that I mention. That is one of the key failings of the development sector, not being able to have an open and transparent conversation about the role that racism and colonialism play in driving the crisis of extreme poverty in the global south but also the climate crisis in the global south.

Q93 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Thank you, Natalie. Following on from that, Lorriann, in terms of your work, what data exists to show the level of racism in the UK in the aid sector? Is there something concrete that we can look at?

Lorriann Robinson: There are, to my knowledge, no comprehensive data sources that can show the level of racism in the aid sector and certainly nothing that shows the level of racism in all of its complexities. To go back to your question of definitions, at The Equity Index we draw on the definition of racism that is put forward by Professor Ibram X. Kendi, who talks about racism as a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalises racial inequities.

To your question about what the level of racism is, there are some elements of racism that will affect hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people, but we do not necessarily categorise them in that way. To give you an example, I would point to the FCDO rate cards that determine the level of pay that staff or consultants working on projects can be paid. These are set based on a combination of location, level of experience and the type of project that people are working on. The highest paid rate permitted goes to the international staff and the lowest paid rates permitted go to the local staff. The way that materialises, in practice, is that the international staff are overwhelmingly white and the low core staff are overwhelmingly non-white, black and brown people. I have seen examples of projects where the application of the FCDO's rate cards means that you can have a professional with 15 years' experience working side by side on a project with a graduate from the UK with two years' experience, and the UK graduate is being paid more than the professional with 15 years' experience. That is an example of what we would say is a policy that is producing inequities between racial groups. I am sure it is not the intention, but that is the consequence of that policy.

We often talk about racism as being a feeling, and inequity being a feeling. You know when you are being treated unfairly. You feel it deeply inside and many of us have felt it. I ask the Committee to think about what that must feel like for that professional with 15 years' experience being paid less than their UK counterpart that they perhaps are supervising.

That is an example of racism in the policies that have broad application. In recent years, and particularly in the last two years, we have seen the emergence of positive spaces where people of colour working in

development are now able to share more about their experiences. I highlight the work of the Diasporic Development group, another group called the REDI Collective, Charity So White, and so on, and those cases are documenting the real-life examples of many iconic organisations in development where systemic racism has been identified as a big problem, including cases where that relates to what was until very recently DfID.

Q94 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Thank you, Lorriann. That was going to be my next question, about what work is currently being undertaken to map equity in the UK aid sector. I think you touched on that. Is there anything else that you would like to add before I hand back to the Chair?

Lorriann Robinson: Sure. At The Equity Index we started our work by looking at what similar indices exist to measure equity across the development sector and even beyond, so we would be very happy to share those data sources with members of the Committee. Additionally, I would highlight some new projects that are emerging, one from an organisation called the Racial Equity Index, which is a movement led by people of colour who are developing indicators to map racial inequities in the international space.

I would also highlight our work. We are conducting a pilot working with five organisations and we are developing indicators looking at the internal dimensions of equity—by that, we mean how organisations conduct their business—and also looking at the external dimensions of equity, so looking at the partnerships between UK organisations and their partners in the global south and to what extent they are developing equitable practices. We publish this work in the next month, and to our knowledge this is a unique contribution and an opportunity to have a deep dive into how racial inequity and other forms of inequity are materialising and how they are being challenged by organisations.

Chair: It would be very useful if when you publish that you could let us have sight of a copy, because it would help feed into this. Over to Virendra Sharma, please.

Q95 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** Natalie, how do aid organisations, communications and fundraising strategies relate to the debate around racism and stereotypes?

Natalie Lartey: This is a key question. We know that NGO communications and fundraising have huge visibility across the TV, digital media and press and when you look at the sector as a whole their combined voice has a big influence on how the UK public make sense of extreme poverty and the climate crisis. What has to be said is there are some key challenges with what we are saying about poverty and climate change, but what we are not saying is equally critical. The fact that at the moment we are still unwilling to be open and transparent about the role that slavery, colonialism, unequal trade and poor terms of trade have played and are playing in fostering poverty, maintaining poverty. An unwillingness to be open and transparent about that is a key problem.

When we are silent on this link between slavery, colonialism, racism and poor terms of trade we create a lot of space for misunderstanding, and room for narratives that focus on this idea of superiority, inferiority, and saviourism.

In much of the development narratives, when you look at them as a whole, we tell a story about modernisation, we tell stories that give the impression that the diverse range of countries that make up what we call the global south still need to be modernised. We act as if there is an ideal of western civilisation that other people need to aspire to, and that story is polarised around race. This is a white, western world that has achieved and it seems normal, and many global south countries become the other and they are looked on as countries that need to aspire to this, with this whole modernisation and civilisation narrative.

How does that get done? It is done through the aid sector. Lots of the narratives talk about the fact that the aid game is here to save other people, to enable them, to empower them, to help them. Those narratives around the need for modernisation and the need to save can only exist while we are silent on the broader root causes of extreme poverty, which have their roots in racism, in colonialism, in poor terms of trade and unequal trade access.

This is why I say it is so important for us to look at what we are saying and to challenge that modernisation storyline and to challenge the saviourism narrative, but also to start to give voice to a richer and more honest conversation about what has caused poverty.

I think the point that was made earlier by Dr Narayanaswamy is important because that conversation needs to happen in the sector, but it also needs to be a national conversation. We need to all come together and have a much more confident, open and transparent dialogue on the colonial era. Frankly, openness, honesty and transparency are the bedrocks of communication. As NGOs doing storytelling, we need to get to grips with that.

Mr Virendra Sharma: Thank you. Lorriann, do you want to add into this question?

Lorriann Robinson: I have nothing to add to that.

Q96 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** I know that this subject is so wide and close to the heart of everybody, and I can understand the answers are quite detailed. I am conscious of the time. I have many more questions to ask, but I am sure that you will be getting letters from us to ask you to respond to these questions later on. Natalie, how much emphasis do aid agencies place on communications and fundraising strategies compared to diversity and inclusion strategies?

Natalie Lartey: This is an interesting question: where does that balance lie? We have heard from previous speakers that since the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement we have been able to have a much

more open and honest conversation about racism in our sector, about colonialism, about this idea of white superiority and ideas about anti-blackness, for example. There is a language now that we have as aid agencies to prioritise diversity and inclusion. The narrative so far has been that when we are fundraising the current messages work, and I think the main question for fundraising in the comms departments is going to be how we start experimenting with different ways of telling stories about aid. That needs to be prioritised, at least for a period, above some of our fundraising targets and above some of our outreach goals.

These issues of racism and the continuation of colonial legacies in aid organisations and the conversations around them speak to the very heart of our culture and our values in the aid sector. That needs to be the priority. We need to look at our culture and values and how the reproduction of racism sits alongside that. Aid agencies need to talk with their fundraising directors and comms directors and give those departments some space for trial and error and some space to find a more honest way of telling the story about extreme poverty that links in racism. They will have to try that out before they can maintain their funding pipeline.

One thing to note is that, as that story changes, aid agencies will be able to reach out to new audiences because the story being told at the moment is not a story that appeals to black audiences and people of colour who live in the global north. We know that the audiences for aid agencies are predominantly white because of some of these storylines and the overall saviourism, modernity and modernisation. While there is a big challenge for aid agencies, there is also an opportunity to diversify their audience and an opportunity to let their current audience know. "Click here. Sign this petition. Pay £5 and we can end poverty" is wearing thin. Audiences require a more sophisticated understanding and a more sophisticated narrative about why global poverty exists and how that links to racism and inequality.

Lorriann Robinson: I agree with everything that Natalie has said. I have never examined the budget lines of fundraising versus DEI initiatives, but I do know that many organisations aim to do diversity and strategic work on the cheap; by that I mean asking staff—predominantly black and people of colour—to set up, lead, strategize and manage these initiatives and manage up accordingly. I hope the Committee will encourage real investment in equity from organisations.

Q97 **Kate Osamor:** I welcome Lorriann and Natalie. Thank you for your answers thus far. In your opinion, how can the UK aid sector make staffing more inclusive?

Lorriann Robinson: The UK aid sector is behind other sectors in the country in terms of its approach to diversity and staffing. There is an irony to that. I often say that we are visionaries. We are the people who believe that we can end poverty and that we can deliver human rights for

everyone, yet when it comes to this agenda we are decidedly timid. From the beginning, I encourage adopting clear and measurable targets.

An example I look to is Sky, which has said clearly and publicly that by 2025 it wants 25% of its workforce to be black and people of colour and for at least 5% of those to be black, across every level of the organisation. I have seen few development organisations move beyond, "We are committed to diversity" to publishing clear and measurable statements.

Another thing they can do is support positive initiatives to help get more diverse teams into the sector and to support people to be promoted and to advance in their careers. If you look at the corporate sector, there have been for years and years programmes that support people to get into the City and into corporate law, which are financed by that sector. They help people from under-represented groups, including black and minority groups, to get into the sector. In the development sector, there is very little.

My organisation runs a programme called Opening Doors, which is designed to help people from under-represented groups get into the development sector. We appreciate the support we have received from the international development sector, but I hope to see more and I hope that will materialise in years to come. More programmes like Opening Doors need to exist at every level. We have the money within the sector and we have the resources. There is no reason they should not be there.

Then, of course, we have to look at the culture. Once we bring people in, if they experience an organisation where their voices are not valued and where their values are not reflected, they will not stay. We need to look at this conversation about inclusive cultures. That means surveying teams, asking about the experiences of staff from different racial groups and examining if people's experiences vary. There is a lot that the development sector can do and a lot that it can learn from.

Natalie Lartey: I support all of the contributions made by Lorriann. I have a few things to add.

HR teams could consider blind recruitment. Generally, the sector can do a lot to increase awareness of career paths and how available they are to black people and people of colour in the UK.

The imagery used in this sector is a definite issue. At the moment, if you look at the type of imagery where black people see themselves, they will largely see people who are suffering from extreme poverty. There is very little imagery of black people and people of colour in influential positions in this sector. That is a big hurdle that the aid sector needs to get over.

Across the board, the sector has a reputation for being quite elitist, quite exclusive and quite male-dominated. When you look at the range of diversity disparities, issues around gender and disability will need to get

looked at together. Recognising that racism will sit at the heart of those intersections is important but, as the sector looks at recruitment, looking at gender, race, sexuality, disability across the piece and placing racism at the heart of those various disparities will stand it in good stead.

Q98 **Chair:** In light of what you have both been saying, are UK aid organisations keen to adopt practices to increase staff from ethnic groups other than white backgrounds or western-centric backgrounds at senior levels or not?

Lorriann Robinson: If and when the Committee has an opportunity to ask the leadership of UK development organisations this question, I suspect every one of them will say, "Yes, we are really keen. We are absolutely committed. This is really important". But I also suspect that it will be light on detail in terms of the positive initiatives and the positive measures being taken.

There are examples, as Natalie said, of practices that organisations are taking to address these issues. For example, an iconic household name in the development sector has taken the decision to approve positive discrimination as its policy. At recruitment stage, if two equally matched candidates meet the specifications and if one comes from an underrepresented group, they make the decision to appoint that person over the other in those circumstances.

To build on Natalie's example of blind recruitment, one large INGO has decided to ban all-white recruitment panels. That is about recognising the potential for bias. It has instructed all of its staff teams that every recruitment panel has to be diverse in its makeup. If the teams cannot put forward a suitably diverse panel, then they will bring in resources externally to make that happen.

Organisations are putting in place pre-recruitment measures to support people from under-represented backgrounds in their organisations to progress when the data suggests they are not progressing through recruitment at the same rate as other ethnic groups.

I do not want to be too unfair. There are examples of good organisations that are thinking seriously about this. Over the past year, on the one hand, there are organisations and leaders who recognise this agenda and its potential for change and transformation of how they work and how they operate. Then there are organisations and leaders who are on a defensive path and who are hoping this will go away and we will stop all this talk about race. This is a critical moment, but of course we are cheering on the first group.

Natalie Lartey: This is an important and interesting question. From my experience, there is a real keenness to increase racial diversity within the aid sector, particularly given the nationwide conversation we have been having about racism and racial injustice at a systemic level in this country. Yes, there is a keenness.

I want to offer a bit of caution. This is not just about getting black and brown people into aid organisations and into senior positions. The important thing for development work is that we have people coming into the sector who have the permission, the space and the funding to think about development policy and practice through their own cultural lenses and their own worldviews, bringing their own language, bringing their own concepts of things like gender, what poverty is, how to tackle poverty, relationships to the natural world and how to protect it. The challenge in the sector at the moment is that because of some of the colonial legacies we have talked about and because of the majority-white staffing issues we have talked about, we have development policy and practice that is not meeting the needs of global south countries and the people who live in their borders. We do not have the funding to meet their needs either. When we get black and brown staff into these organisations, that is the diversity piece. The inclusion piece is about people bringing their language, their culture and their world view and transforming how development policy and development practice happens so that it is efficient and effective.

We all are putting lots of money into this endeavour. We want more money to go into this endeavour. That money needs to be working as best it can. While we do development through a western lens, we are not getting the mileage that we need from our investments.

Q99 **Chair:** Briefly, would there be any impact if aid organisations were required to publish data on diversity and inclusion within their workforce? What would be the impact if there were more diverse workplaces on the quality of aid programming?

Lorriann Robinson: There would be an impact because development organisations often use transparency as a tool to drive up standards in our own efforts to hold others to account, be it donors or others. We know that transparency can be an effective way of driving up standards. If you take pay audits, for example, once the data around pay inequities is revealed, it creates an onus to address them. It is difficult also from the perspective of advocacy within organisations. Sometimes staff will sense that there are inequities, but without the data they cannot know that and they are more hampered in their ability to work together collectively to address those inequities and challenge those systems.

To your question about what impacts it would have on development programmes, I agree with the contribution that Natalie made. Having more diverse teams of UK organisations can and will have a positive effect. If organisations sit down to decide their priorities for the year, it is more effective to have diverse groups rather than mono-racial groups, with people who can bring their life experiences, their perspectives and their cultures to those conversations. That is important.

Ultimately, a challenge is that the audience for UK development is often the UK Government and the UK public, who fund it. We want to change that spotlight and put it on the people whom development interventions

are trying to affect. Practically, if staff come from minority backgrounds, sometimes our perspectives can make a difference to development programmes because of an affinity we might feel to those communities. They might be our family. We may have close ties. It can mean that people feel more connected. It may or may not mean that they have contextual or local knowledge to share. That is important, but it is just a starting point. The fundamental issues that we heard about earlier and that Degan Ali articulated so well will not go away just because there are more black and brown people working at HQ in development organisations.

Natalie Lartey: I agree with Lorriann. Yes, we are at the beginning of this journey. It will be important to increase the amount of black people and people of colour who work in the sector, as I said, particularly if you can create an inclusive environment and they can bring their whole self into that role.

In addition, we need to look at other measures to see an impact. It would be important to partner something like measuring racial diversity with something that maybe rewards a change in practice, particularly practice that is antiracist and practice that can disrupt the colonial power dynamics that are still very live in our organisations and institutions. We can reward practice that means we fund Zimbabwean or Zambian national organisations directly. We could reward practice that means an organisation co-writes a funding bid and co-manages, reports on and delivers that bid, rather than having a largely white northern NGO lead on writing a bid and managing the fund and then having the delivery done by an Angolan organisation, for example.

Yes, measure diversity of black and brown staff and people of colour, but in addition to that, to see impacts, we have to put incentives and rewards around changing practice so that we start to deconstruct some of those colonial power dynamics and start to embed antiracism in the values and cultures of our organisations.

Q100 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** Natalie, what three actions should the UK Government adopt to increase diversity and inclusion across the aid sector?

Natalie Lartey: This is a tricky question. First, we need to reframe how we understand poverty, rather than allowing the sector to do so, the UK Government included, the FCDO being a critical part of the sector. Starting with the FCDO and opening out more broadly to the sector, we need to reframe how we understand poverty and to be clear that it is a consequence of slavery, colonialism and unequal trade relationships and it is not a natural state but a man-made state.

With that understanding clear and being openly communicated, we need to look at how we transform policy and practice on the ground to get this more effective way of tackling poverty running, which speaks to and

works with the language, culture and world view of the different societies the sector engages with across the plethora of global south countries.

To give you an example, at the moment 80% of the finance in the renewable energy space goes to about four organisations, western businesses, even though there is a huge number of businesses emerging across African countries and southeast Asian countries that want to operate in that space. That is the type of thing I am talking about when I say that we need to change how we are operating and transform our practice and our action so that we bring other cultures and worldviews and their networks of global south businesses into the sector.

Lastly, I know we are short on time but this is important. Look, we have established in this discussion this afternoon that a central part of extreme poverty is being caused by racism, by colonialism and by unfair trade regimes and deals. Knowing that is a root cause is a real driver to scale up and improve investment in tackling poverty. Knowing why this is happening, now that silence has been broken, is a real imperative to do much more to end this situation where we have people of colour and black people disproportionately affected by global poverty. That needs to change.

Q101 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Lorriann, what three actions could the UK aid agencies adopt to increase diversity and inclusion across the aid sector?

Lorriann Robinson: The aid agencies should think about the power imbalances within their organisations and think about how power operates within their part of the development sector. We need to move away from the top-line commitment that anti-racism is a road we want to travel down and to think about how that materialises in practice. The issues of inequity that exist within UK private sector contractors, among the thinktanks and research institutions and among the NGOs are different. There are racial inequities within all of those subsectors. We take that approach with the aid sector, but I encourage development agencies, wherever they sit, to think about power and how inequities between racial groups manifest within their part of the development sector. That is a starting point to then think about strategies for redressing and reversing those.

I also want to encourage organisations to go beyond that and to ensure that the work on equity is not just led by DEI committees within their organisations but is mainstreamed across every element so that fundraising teams, research teams and programmes teams are actively thinking about how racial inequities show up in their work. What strategies can they take to reverse them?

If you will allow me to go back and offer one thing that the FCDO might do, all the speakers we have heard from today have talked about the importance of a national conversation about the UK's historical legacy in relation to slavery and to colonialism. The FCDO needs to be part of that conversation. I encourage the FCDO to look at the current state we are

in, where Ministers and the senior leadership of the FCDO are making decisions about how millions of pounds of funding will be cut, and to think about how that materialises in terms of racial groups. Who is making the decisions about cuts that will mean that promised school places will not be funded and that promised skilled birth attendants will not be there? Which racial groups and which people feel the consequences of those decisions?

Right in this moment, the FCDO has an opportunity to focus on these issues more broadly, to move away from an approach to aid and development that talks about the UK's national interests and to shift towards one that thinks about mutual interests, rights, equity and justice and sees aid as a small way in which the UK can play a part in redressing some of those injustices.

Chair: On behalf of the Committee, thank you to our final two witnesses—as well as the two who were here earlier today—for coming in front of us. If afterwards you wish you had said something and brought it into a question, please feel free to write in to us. We are open to getting as much evidence as we can. Everything that has been said today in this Committee certainly will inform our report, when we do get to write it. Thank you very much indeed.