

Counterweight is a UK organisation that helps individuals and organisations experiencing problems with the implementation of “Critical Social Justice” ideas including currently dominant concepts of “anti-racism” in their professions, organisations, educational establishments or social life. We have several collectives of individuals within various spheres who collaborate to address the harm being done to their own sector. Prominent among them are humanitarian aid and charity workers who are particularly concerned about the effects of this on the individuals and communities they serve who are at risk of receiving inferior or diminished services because of ideological bias and the redirection of funds towards anti-racism activities, training, mediation and DEI audits. The humanitarian aid workers of Counterweight have anonymously contributed their experiences of the kinds of problems that have been caused for fear of repercussions. It should be clear why this culture of fear within humanitarian aid is a problem.

“I am a social scientist with extensive on-the-ground experience in humanitarian aid, in a governance position in global health.

Here are six broad concerns I have about current approaches to anti-racism in humanitarian aid.

1. Over-investment in expensive DEI consultancies and training with questionable benefits.

The DEI consultation and training industry is expanding exponentially. It is not regulated. Some trainers have little formal education and experience in their field. Some push a particular overly race-conscious form of anti-racism that is not inclusive of diverse worldviews that exist in the charity sector. Worldviews from culturally and linguistically diverse groups and ethnic minorities can be quite conservative and oppose the CSJ doctrine. There is [little evidence](#) that this training changes attitudes or behaviour and there is some question as to whether they may make the problem [worse](#). The ideology underlying some DEI training diminishes ethnic minorities as powerless and lacking in agency so that some minority groups oppose this training. Others object to the exploration of their unconscious mind, a fixation on invisible power systems or the acceptance that discriminating against certain groups is necessary to empower others. The underlying ideology to CSJ [originates](#) in high-income countries therefore, the terminology and concepts tend to focus on home societies or global north based HQs. Therefore, their relevance is questionable for international organisations with very diverse workforces.

2. Unsuccessful conversations:

A great deal of time and resources are invested in the struggle to clearly articulate the DEI problem, with a lack of consensus and clear identification of the underlying causes. Lengthy debates focus on term definition, which can at least in part be explained by concept creep. Concepts that were once clear and almost universal like ‘racism’ are losing their meaning as the ground shifts with new terminology rapidly arising (micro-aggressions, colour-blind racism, dog-whistling) and then there are the new applications of old terms (white supremacy). Adding to this is a form of catastrophization where robust debate is suddenly considered ‘unsafe’ for some, and people refer to threats to their very existence.

3. Funds being diverted from communities in need and instead used for social problems in HQ.

How much donor money is spent cumulatively on DEI and how has it benefited the people you serve? With needs being sorely underserved as well as on the rise, aren't there much better uses for this money that aligns more clearly with our charitable purpose?

4. Racialisation further entrenches perceptions of racism.

Despite heavy investment in DEI, some organisations are finding that staff are increasingly reporting feeling unheard or discriminated against; these increases cannot be fully explained by the improved reporting mechanisms. Is it possible the racialisation of our sector is encouraging people to feel oppressed, or discriminated against, in a way that cannot be sourced to their objective circumstances? Some reputable cognitive psychologists are concerned that the CSJ ideology is encouraging unhealthy thought patterns and can therefore have negative mental health [consequences](#).

5. The evaluation challenge.

With many organisations spending a great deal on DEI plans there is significant confusion regarding how to measure success. HR heads struggle to quantify/qualify progress towards DEI goals and the overall feeling seems to be that it is never enough and never soon enough. In other cases, invalid surveys are developed by inexperienced HR teams or by consultants who are incentivised to reveal racism, uncovering problems that are not well defined or are less significant than the [results suggest](#).

6. Public positioning and messaging.

Many charitable organisations attempt to communicate complex social phenomena in social media short form and so it is not surprising they are misleading, inaccurate or attribute undue causation to race. These messages have a divisive effect and are often not helpful or actionable. A few examples: "The COVID19 pandemic is demonstrating what we all know: millennia of patriarchy have resulted in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture, which damages everyone – women, men, girls and boys" ([United Nations](#)). "Poverty is an institution of white supremacy. Inequality is an institution of white supremacy. Injustice is an institution of white supremacy" ([Oxfam International](#)). These messages fail to recognize multiple complex contributing factors to social outcomes and such simplistic and overly race-conscious narratives can further divide staff, donors and the general public and undermine public trust in humanitarian aid and charity.

The concerns above pertain to a specific ideological approach to addressing racism: critical social justice (anti-racism). We strongly recommend taking a more pragmatic and non-ideological approach to addressing these problems that is more inclusive and accepting of diverse worldviews.

In 2020, a comprehensive consultation of staff working in the Global South (GS) collected 83 concrete actions to address racism and discrimination in a large international humanitarian organisation. There was acknowledgement that many underlying factors (aside from race) contributed to unfair outcomes such as geographic location, education, income, gender and disability.

The consultation highlighted a tendency towards favouritism. International staff or people close to European culture are seen to be favoured, and the current HR policies and management style

perpetuate this system. Locally hired staff in the GS provided examples of unfair differences in remuneration, health policies and per diem. Overall, access to information, training, and promotion opportunities were considered unequal.

Locally hired staff proposed concrete actions to address racism and discrimination including: A fairer remuneration system. The same social package for all. Equitable recruitment and expatriation policies. Access to training and real opportunities for development. Working better together. Responding to the communication deficit and inequalities in access to information. More representative governance.

There have been great improvements made in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion over decades and these advancements need to be documented and acknowledged.

Research: Some GN donors who stipulate a need for projects to be led by GS partners often don't recognize the honest lack of capacity in some of these settings – not owing to a lack of talent or ability in the GS but simply a lack of resources and the need to balance research with clinical and teaching responsibilities. Some GN donors prioritize technical solutions (i.e. - Gates) rather than using human-centred design, whereby people in need identify their own solutions – that are often not technical.

Aid is short-term with the aim to hand over to development agencies when possible and move onto the next crisis/emergency. With climate change and continued unequal development, humanitarian needs are predicted to double by 2050 (ICRC, 2020) and the needs are already severely unmet. Aid agencies cannot always offer long-term contracts and provide social safety nets to locally hired staff. It is not their role to take over Government responsibilities. This is often misconstrued as structural racism. These realities need to be taken into account in DEI discussions.

Racism in the aid sector: The way international staff and locally hired staff are treated can seem unfair. For example, it is not possible to pay an Australian Nurse and a Nurse from the DRC the same wage. This would breach employment law in Australia and introducing salaries that are 100 x the usual local salaries in humanitarian settings, can create social problems, lead to conflict, or even undermine the local health system.

Some humanitarians can lack cultural competence: especially if they come from monocultural countries and have not worked in multi-racial/ethnic/cultural teams under difficult circumstances before. Cultural competence training takes a broad view to addressing interpersonal racism and is compatible with a wide range of worldviews and ethical frameworks. Anti-racism training seems to heighten the social significance of race (over all other features) and doesn't inspire understanding or agency. Therefore, anti-racism may not be the best training approach in very diverse iNGOs.

How can aid actors be actively anti-racist? I would first question why we don't remain non-racist. The first humanitarian principle is humanity, also known as humanism or non-discrimination. We should seriously question the need and logic for increasing the significance of skin colour in humanitarian and developing settings. This may be counterproductive to achieving DEI goals in the sector. Critical Race Theory based decolonisation of aid activities should be thoroughly interrogated and tested for their effectiveness before introducing them into humanitarian practice.

How does the language used by aid actors relate to discussions around racism and power dynamics? We can and should reflect on the language we use but also accept that language evolves organically. We also have to recognize the practical utility and reality of words like 'capacity building' and 'beneficiaries' i.e. – in grant applications, we must demonstrate that patients/populations will benefit from the activities. Further, the over-interrogation and policing of language can overlook an

honest analysis of the real problems underlying the language and lead to false solutions. Aid actors work in very diverse settings and there is a need to be understood. For example, using language from the global north like 'POC' or 'BAME' will not be meaningful in diverse South East Asian settings.

Key to addressing racism in aid is to ensure the investment benefits the patients and communities we serve and not simply serve the consciences, brand or social license of wealthy people in the global north.

"I work for a charity that focuses on the wellbeing of children. Intersectionality has been accepted as a guiding principle to shape all of our work, internally (from recruitment to staff experiences) and externally (how we engage the world to achieve better outcomes for children from deprived backgrounds). In our domestic work, there has been a lot of intellectual energy to put intersectionality at the heart of our anti-poverty and early childhood outcomes strategy. Each team and individual member of staff has been asked to have an intersectionality work objective. The Evidence and Learning Team has set out to embed intersectionality as part of our Evidence and Learning Framework and its application to our work. There is a push to frame all injustices in society as originating from a unitary system of oppression.

All of this adds up to an intense pressure to include an intersectionality element to all of our work, whether a public event reflecting on the efficacy of a new early learning intervention, or a foregrounding of racial demographics in how we plan and report grant giving. Hours and hours of training, meetings, development of frameworks, self-directed study, writing of newsletter items has gone into this work. For my colleagues working on international issues, it is the same, with a big push to decolonise aid. Many of us care about creating inclusive workplaces and anti-poverty strategies that benefit all poor children. Opposition in any form is felt and seen as seeking to uphold oppression. This means we're not going to get the best research, the best policies, or the best use of resources."

"I work for a small charity supporting refugees who are suffering from PTSD. Almost none of the refugees are white. Most of the staff are white and many of them are volunteers. Every one of us does this work because we care about humans who are suffering, and we care particularly about refugees whose mental health is suffering. The idea that we are all racist is both absurd and insulting and the increasing amount of time spent focusing on the presumed racial biases of white staff is time taken away from focusing on the very real mental trauma suffered by refugees.

"I work for a UK charity that fights isolation and loneliness in elderly people in a multicultural area which consists largely of black and Asian people. Consequently, they have a variety of viewpoints which we have to navigate as we bring people together in inclusive, open and welcoming environments. Problems have arisen since the instigation of anti-racism policies and DEI training following the BLM wave of 2020. This was brought about by young, educated, middle-class staff and disrespects views held by the older generations of black and Asian people we serve.

The environment this has created is simply not as friendly as before. The staff are constantly on watch for microaggressions and racism causing older people that want to come and have a relaxing time socialising to feel under pressure to be careful over what they say and to whom for constant fear of being "called out" for some inadvertent microaggression, Attendance for our programmes is reducing and older people are leaving. There is an ever decreasing diversity of viewpoints either held

or accepted. There is a yearning to have these “difficult” conversations about this particular version of history and its manifestation into structural racism in UK society. We spend a lot of time explaining to very old, quite happy, black people how society is stacked against them.

Among the staff an inordinate amount of time discussing racism and how it affects everything we do. We track microaggressions. Discussions internally are now incredibly delicate. We track “diversity” within the stakeholders (staff, volunteers, board etc) keenly, albeit it is unclear to what end or with what goal. We spend a disproportionate amount of money on DEI work. Given that we spend almost nothing on other non-core training areas, the fact that we have a permanent member of staff working just on DEI elements is a demonstrable waste of donor money.

The intentions from the staff team are, I think, well intended. But it’s also destroying our charitable delivery and our working culture.

“I am an ex-aid worker who worked for a large medical aid organisation and I am concerned about the effect of critical theory on aid. Let’s be clear up front: I don’t dispute that any international NGO or indeed any multi-ethnic institution has to face up to the issues of prejudice and racism. The question is not – therefore – do these problems exist. We agree they do. The question is how to work towards their resolution.

The notions of “structural racism”, “white saviorism”, “intersecting discriminators” are all terms that appear with increasing frequency in humanitarian organisations which have emerged from the American academe and activist world. This theoretical approach dates back to the late seventies, and stems from the idea that “delineating difference” can be a source of “social empowerment and reconstruction” – rather than just domination (as mainstream liberal thinking had hitherto assumed).

“Delineating difference” means primarily seeing an individual through the prism of their “identity”, where identity usually means skin colour (and often, gender). But this is also where identity is deemed to end. And it’s obvious why, when you think about it. The more facets one considers to identity, the more complex everything becomes, and the more one converges on mainstream liberal thinking, which is to consider and value *the individual*.

Now, it might be that unity or solidarity with one’s ethnic group provides a feeling of strength and empowerment. It might also be an ex-post rationalization for ethnocentrism.

Whatever it is, and it will be different things to different people, it runs contrary to (then) mainstream liberal thinking which sought to play down these differences as a means of deconstructing prejudice and racism. Identity politics (or rather, the Critical Race Theory it is based on) is *precisely* what Martin Luther King asked us *not* to do.

In the past, humanitarian aid organisations have spoken out against the Governments of Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cambodia or Sudan. If we carry on down this path, such events will have to be re-interpreted through a race-power dynamic. The *content* of the message is now secondary to the *identity* of the speaker and that is where knowledge is understood to be based. So, there is no objective reality. So, when an NGO makes a statement about mass rape in Darfur, the debate is not about the objective reality of this (or not), or the likely consequences of speaking out, but about *who the speaker is*, what his perceptions and ideology are, and where he sits within the power structure. The rape victims here are just irrelevant, a prop. This is not humanitarianism which relies on *independence, impartiality and neutrality* as core values. Indeed, the very possibility of neutrality is denied by Critical theory.

Seeing people first and foremost through the prism of their skin colour is an abhorrent way to view people. It is the very sin that anti-racism is supposed to oppose and yet it is also the proposed remedy. It is completely absurd.

When white American nationalists do this, we decry this as the worst sort of racism. When oppressed minorities do it, we (are supposed to) applaud it as liberatory and woke. Identity Politics takes the philosophical view that *means* do not matter, only *ends*. This is what Gandhi tried to warn us against doing.

And finally, this approach *is not working*.

Humanitarianism was founded on liberalism and should continue working to achieve its liberal ideals – valuing individuals for their own sake, not for the sake of an identity whittled down to one or two aspects. Some institutions fail to do this properly - yes. But what is being proposed with the American theoretical approach to anti-racism is to abandon the idea altogether.”