

International Development Committee Inquiry on Exploring Racism in the Aid Sector Submission of Written Evidence by Save the Children UK

Save the Children was founded 100 years ago in London. It is now a global movement operating in 120 countries, fighting to ensure that all children survive, learn, and are protected. As a large international NGO based in the UK, Save the Children holds considerable power and privilege. We are committed to addressing the deeply ingrained attitudes, practices, and power imbalances we have in our partnerships. We recognise that we have much to learn and unlearn, and that this journey is likely to be long and at times difficult. We acknowledge our debt to the work done by the #AidToo, #CharitySoWhite and #BlackLivesMatter movements and our organisational BAME Network in raising our level of understanding of harm and of intersectionality, often at extraordinary emotional and personal cost.

We are hopeful this inquiry will encourage a dialogue with the Government and the wider sector to better understand how we can also shift towards decolonisation and localisation, including through the addressing of racism in the sector.

STRUCTURE OF THE AID SECTOR

What are the historical processes that have led to countries and organisations from the global north dominating the international aid sector?

- 1.1 The majority of aid workers, and the sector, have a genuine desire to help those in less fortunate situations. Save the Children works in a range of countries and contexts, and wherever we are, our priority is protecting the rights of children. However, even with the best intentions this does not always translate into equitable actions.
- 1.2 Since the emergence of the foreign aid sector in the aftermath of the Second World War, built on the structures of European colonisation, the basic concept has remained that aid is a transfer of money from richer 'developed' countries in the global North, to poorer 'developing' countries in the global South¹. The UK's history of colonial oppression, systemic racism and injustice that permeates British society also permeate the culture of British aid agencies, including Save the Children UK (SCUK).
- 1.3 SCUK recognises the importance of correcting this and addressing the deeply entrenched attitudes, practices and power relationships that exist within our current business models and ways of working. We are grateful that our staff are coming along with us as we learn and adapt.
- 1.4 Ways of working for International NGOs (INGOs) have developed around ideals, systems and models defined in the global North regarding budgeting and reporting procedures, timelines, structures and practices. Inequitable power relationships often exist between international staff from the global North, who have a tendency to operate on the assumption that they represent the global standard, and host country staff who are expected to adapt to working and communicating on their terms. Dominance of the English and French languages

¹ Glennie, J (2021) The Future of Aid

has acted as a structural barrier for civil society organisations (CSO) in the global South and reinforces unequal power dynamics.

1.5 A further criticism of the aid sector is that many of the top leadership posts continue to be occupied by people from the global North, which has fostered a sense that the office is where decisions are made and what happens in the field is peripheral.

1.6 As part of its work on Diversity and Inclusion, SCUK recognises the importance of reflecting on its own history, as an institution grounded in UK society, a country that was at the heart of the exploitation, injustice and oppression associated with slavery and colonialism.

1.7 However, there is currently no consensus across the INGO sector on how to shift funding, resources and power to the global South.

What are the practical implications of the concentration of funding and resources in donors and international aid organisations from the global north?

2.1 Compliance requirements by global North donors can create barriers for INGOs in supporting and working with grassroots organisations who may have less experience and resources to deal with these heavy compliance requirements. Often when INGOs work with local partners who cannot meet particular compliance requirements, such as procurement policies, they take on those responsibilities themselves to minimise risk and instead sub-contract specific deliverables; this can reinforce INGO dominance and inequitable partnerships.

2.2 Southern NGOs remain severely underrepresented in coordination clusters, advocacy and funding. The Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) brought together Southern NGOs and created a Localisation Performance Measurement Framework designed to measure our own performance. The Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA) also recently carried out a localisation consultation with regional and country offices. The consultation highlighted that even when local actors are included in forums these are often not inclusive – language barriers combined with a sense of an INGO ‘elite’ mean local actors may not speak up and are often excluded from any subsequent bilateral discussions between donors and INGOs.

2.3 Staff movement from local or national NGOs to INGOs can lead to a ‘brain drain’ within local civil society.

2.4 Local and national actors and communities are often not actively involved in decision-making on strategies and programmes that affect them. With the Grand Bargain we, as a sector, have made a core commitment to work with local and national actors to facilitate direct access to decision-making. However, there are limited ways of holding INGOs accountable to these commitments. This has resulted in local and national actors often having limited opportunities to engage with international or national policy discussions.

RACISM IN THE AID SECTOR

Why do we need to have a discussion about racism in the aid sector?

3.1 Racism is structural and embedded in all aspects of our society, including the aid sector which is not immune from it. The sector cannot achieve its espoused values of humanity and equality without addressing the underlying issues of racism and colonialism. Discussions, including listening, learning and reflecting, provide an opportunity to increase awareness of how racism manifests in systems, practices, culture and narratives within the sector in overt and covert ways. These discussions are necessary and urgent before commitments and actions can follow.

3.2 The aid sector has roots in colonialism and its leadership shapes organisational culture. These factors combined with the political economy of international development mean the sector is heavily skewed in favour of INGOs, which are led and controlled by a small demographic which is not reflective of the diversity of the communities it seeks to help. This often leads to ineffective solutions which do not take into account cultural nuances or local input.

3.3 BAME colleagues often deal with unconscious bias and microaggression from white colleagues as working in the aid sector creates a somewhat paradoxical and inhibiting logic: "If I work in international development, how can I be racist?" This leads to unchecked behaviour or resistance to attempts to address this, which creates a regressive workplace that does not fulfil its full potential.

What are the practical implications of racism in the aid sector?

4.1 On a day-to-day basis, racism in the aid sector leads to BAME colleagues feeling unwelcome at their workplace and ill-suited to the career in general.

4.2 Ultimately it undermines faith in the purpose of the sector itself – this will have a knock-on effect with BAME colleagues potentially discouraging family and friends from entering the field, further amplifying lack of diversity in the sector.

4.3 Racism in the sector also leads to poor treatment and dehumanisation of BAME recipients which negates the very purpose of international aid and the communities we serve.

How can aid actors be actively anti-racist?

5.1 Aid actors can be actively anti-racist by:

- Ensuring appropriate language and images are used by the sector in advocacy, fundraising, and other communications, which stops the practice of positioning the communities we serve as the 'Other'.
- Ensuring that neither the language nor images used reinforce white saviourism.
- Including and encouraging diversity within all levels of INGO organisations.
- Encouraging localisation of aid and knowledge-sharing practices between INGOs and local partners.
- Ensuring the presence of local partners in international forums.

How does the language used by aid actors relate to discussions around racism and power dynamics?

6.1 So called ‘development speak’ is actively harmful. Jargon excludes people. It signals who is in the group, and who is out - and it can distance the sector from the people it works with - or worse, perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

6.2 Following the events of summer 2020, SCUK’s Executive Leadership Team published a [statement of solidarity](#)², including five commitments, one of which is the commitment to reconstruct our storytelling. We have produced guidelines for ethical storytelling and are improving how we use language to describe our programmes and the people we work with by developing a glossary.

6.3 Creation of the glossary included consultations with our offices in East Africa and the Chairs of SCUK’s equalities networks, as well as consultations and workshops with other internal stakeholders.

6.4 The consultations identified various areas of concern on language and how this relates to discussions about racism and power. Concerns include the presentation of SCUK as the ‘hero’, portraying donors as saviours, the usage of jargon, the usage of military terms, language which denies agency and reinforces old power structures, and colonial mindsets.

6.5 An example of a term included in our glossary is ‘beneficiary/beneficiaries’. We are discouraging usage and have broad cross-sector³ and cross-organisational support for doing so. The term implies passivity and paternalism: ‘they’ benefit from what ‘we’ do. Recently, Save the Children’s Lebanon office argued in a development of a Financial Inclusion App proposal for this shift by stating that “beneficiaries are referred to throughout this project as the *product users*, in an intentional linguistic shift from neo-colonialist thinking in the humanitarian sector, and indicative of their role as voluntary collaborators”.

6.6 Language is one element of wider changes in SCUK’s storytelling and communications. A list of words will not achieve successful change in isolation; however, it signals our intent to become an anti-racist organisation through an inclusive internal process. We have tried to build consensus when compiling our glossary and hope this will be a starting point for further reflection and are keen to engage the FCDO and the sector on inclusive language.

What steps should the UK Government take to address racism in the aid sector?

7.1 The Government has worked very hard to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector and has made this a public priority. The same energy should be applied in seeking to understand its role in dismantling racist structures in international development and considering the history and role of colonisation. The publication of and response to the Sewell Report has highlighted the disconnect between the Government’s view of the manifestation of

² <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2020/blm-solidarity-statement-charity-leadership-team>

³ <https://brightthemag.com/why-i-hate-the-word-beneficiaries-778f49445402>

racism in the UK and the lived experience of communities. The Report has damaged already fragile relations with the BAME community and so any approach the Government takes to racism in the aid sector must be well informed, honest and candid even if this brings to light unpalatable truths.

How could a systematic approach to tackling racism help to strengthen relations between aid delivery organisations and the communities where programmes are delivered?

8.1 SCUK recognises the importance of questioning unequal power dynamics in the aid sector and addressing the deeply entrenched attitudes, practices and power relationships that exist within its current business models and ways of working. A systematic approach to tackling racism should draw on the Grand Bargain commitments – including ensuring more support and funding for local and national organisations, and a ‘participation revolution’ where people receiving aid are actively involved in making decisions which affect their lives.

8.2 As a co-signatory to the Grand Bargain, Save the Children has pledged to empower local and national NGOs, including committing to direct at least 25% of its funding to local organisations by 2020, and to better share decision-making powers. We are also committed to providing 10% additional resourcing beyond project direct costs to partners’ indirect costs and capacity strengthening – and a willingness to adopt a higher risk threshold to give partners more power and freedom.

8.3 Localisation offers the potential for increased impact for children through the movement of resources, capacities and leadership closer to the everyday lives of children and their communities, and creates opportunities for locally-led and locally-owned organisations to develop programmes that are culturally appropriate and relevant to their needs. Evidence-based advocacy policies and strategies could also drive more change for children and communities at local and country level, with local actors advocating for local response systems and action in line with children’s and community needs.

8.4 SCUK believes aid delivery organisations should seek to learn what communities are already doing to help their children and support and complement those response efforts, filling gaps that community members are not able to fill. We call this community-led action.

8.5 Community-led action supports child rights-based responses, localisation efforts, integrated response planning and participation. Community-led approaches take many forms, all of them feature community power, dialogue and decision making – including by children. Building on community strengths and resilience, community-led approaches are more sustainable, yield better results and encourage accountability.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

How diverse is staffing within international aid organisations? Does this change at different levels of seniority?

9.1 There seems to be a similar picture across the aid sector regarding the representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff. At SCUK, 19% of our staff come from BAME backgrounds.

If benchmarked against similar organisations, we see that for example British Red Cross' BAME workforce stands at 13%. The total BAME population for the UK stands at 14%, so one could suggest that 19% is a good representation. However, if we benchmark against the economically active BAME population in Greater London at 32%, and the BAME population of London which is around 40%, then we are clearly falling far short.

9.2 According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisation's UK Civil Society Almanac 2020, staff from BAME backgrounds make up just 9% of the charity workforce. There is clearly work that needs to be done encouraging more people into the wider sector, not simply at leadership or Board level. Recent movements such as Charity so White have highlighted the need for the sector to focus on not only representation but also on inclusion, as only 10% of senior managers are from BAME backgrounds according to the Third Sector Diversity study. A common pattern in most organisations within the sector will consist of most representation in the more junior grades which then significantly decreases in the more senior grades.

What actions have international aid organisations taken to promote diversity and inclusion and what impact have these had?

10.1 Many aid organisations have developed Diversity & Inclusion strategies along with key objectives to work towards anti-racism. At SCUUK we carried out a period of consultation which gained momentum when the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd came into the world's view in the summer of 2020. Through a now well-supported BAME staff network, with regular dialogue with the CEO and resource allocated to a senior Diversity post, along with an ambitious Diversity & Inclusion Strategy, actions are now being taken to look inwards and develop programmes, interventions and reviews to become truly inclusive. This includes:

- A data project to ensure we collect the right data on recruitment and staff in post, and other metrics to track patterns and themes in order to highlight pockets of underrepresentation and barriers that may exist within our processes. This includes ensuring that this data is shared and given to department Heads to develop local actions.
- Detecting bias in our recruitment process and ensuring it is free from discrimination and unfair practice. This has included guidance on representative panels and providing question themes to candidates prior to interview and widening the net in terms of where we publicise our jobs.
- Piloting a specific mentoring development programme for staff from under-represented backgrounds who will be mentored and sponsored by senior colleagues. These senior colleagues will also be 'reverse-mentored' by their mentees, gaining first-hand insight into the lived experience of someone from an underrepresented background.

What actions do international aid organisations still need to take to promote diversity and inclusion?

11.1 There has been much discussion in this area, and it is now time to act. To make significant change there needs to be robust representation at Board level. At SCUUK we have increased the representation of Black and Asian Trustees on our Board. Along with this representation,

Trustees need to be given a true picture of the state of inclusion within the organisation and have regular progress updates so that they too can lead and champion race equality.

11.2 There need to be clear strategic priorities whether it be on representation, improved sense of belonging and experience for staff from BAME backgrounds, and to eradicate any unfair or discriminatory practices. Setting targets may help this. Another key area of support which is fundamental to success is resource and expertise. This should include a specific Diversity Team leading and coaching colleagues to embed diversity into all core processes; funding to bring in specific expertise or race experts offering different perspectives and acting as critical friends, as well as supporting and prioritising dialogue with any BAME staff networks.

11.3 Consultation and engagement with staff from BAME backgrounds is extremely important so that we can learn from their 'lived experience'. Positive action programmes can help level the playing field along with concrete actions of setting targets for representation at senior levels or reporting, exploring and making right any Ethnicity pay gaps.

What actions should donors such as the FCDO take to promote diversity and inclusion in the organisations they fund?

12.1 The FCDO should ask organisation for more Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) data from organisations submitting applications for funding. Before funding is awarded it is important the FCDO check and review the current state of race equality within the organisation. This could be done in a variety of ways:

- Requesting an organisation's key strategic D&I objectives.
- As part of their Code of Conduct process FCDO could request any diversity data pertaining to Ethnicity, Gender, disability, and sexual orientation, including staff in post from BAME backgrounds and where they sit within the organisation. This could also include attrition data by ethnic group to see if there is any over representation in leavers from certain ethnic minority groups.
- Applying funding stipulations that require organisations to use a certain percentage of the funding to carry out direct interventions to enhance and achieve better race equality in their organisation and its work.

12.2 The FCDO could develop a standard for Race Equality that organisations could 'opt into' to demonstrate their commitment to Race Equality.

12.3 Additionally, the FCDO could host events and seminars designed to help highlight good practice when it comes to race equality in the sector.