

**WRITTEN EVIDENCE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE (IDC) OF THE UK PARLIAMENT**

SUBMITTED BY DEVELOPMENT REIMAGINED (DR)

TITLE: RACISM IN THE AID SECTOR

1. Who we are:

Development Reimagined (DR) is a pioneering international development consultancy and the first Kenyan wholly foreign owned enterprise based in Beijing, with offices in London and Nairobi. Established by the CEO, Hannah Ryder, DR is committed to deliver its mission - to maximize positive impact, cultivate sustainable development and reduce global poverty by reimagining the way development takes place. DR's strategy has been based on its three underlying values:

- 1) development is about "us" not "them";
- 2) aid is only one answer among many;
- 3) diversity is a huge strength.

Through a diverse and multilingual team of experts, DR embraces these three values in every approach, partnership and project we undertake around the world. Working with a wide range of stakeholders, DR has previous experience in how to tackle racism in order to ensure greater impact and effectiveness of aid. Racism in the international development sector not only re-enforces the colonial power dynamics but also impedes the progress of global development. Therefore, as a purpose-led organisation which promotes South-South cooperation and local ownership, but also works with multiple southern and northern governments, international organisations and private sector actors, we have been working to fight against racism, discrimination and inequality.

Only by taking action to combat these issues will we be able to create just, inclusive, prosperous and sustainable societies, communities and nations. For this reason, we are submitting this written evidence to the International Development Committee of the UK Parliament in order to contribute towards addressing racism in the aid sector.

2. Structure of the aid sector

Although there are various theories analysing the historical reasons behind the advancement of the global North over the global South, it is an undeniable fact that the countries and international organisations located and headquartered in the global North have dominated the international aid sector for decades. The concentration of resources in the "developed" world and the continuous funding that is given by the global North to the global South not only increases the reliance of southern – "developing"- countries on foreign capital but further perpetuates their aid dependency. Moreover, the fact that the major donors, such as FCDO – who also hold powerful positions in international organisations – are the ones who decide on foreign aid allocations has further raised concerns regarding the impartiality of aid. Questions such as "*are donor-countries providing foreign aid to pursue their long-term strategic interests?*" and "*is aid actually effective in terms of meeting the developmental needs of recipient countries?*" have shed the spotlight on some of the various impediments of the aid sector.

3. Racism in the aid sector

However, the matters of “*aid impartiality*” and “*aid effectiveness*” are by no means the only issues in the sector. The anti-racist protests that have swept parts of the world after the murder of George Floyd, have - finally - shed light on the problem of racism in the aid sector. Although we are today face-to-face with a racial reckoning, racism - in both the humanitarian and development sector - is not a new phenomenon. In fact, racism is highly interconnected with the colonial legacy and is deeply ingrained in power dynamics.

Phenomena of racism by aid workers and aid agencies are evident in various “forms”. Such forms include among others: adopting racist and discriminatory attitudes towards people of color (POC), disregarding the cultural and knowledge systems of indigenous people, implementing top-down reforms and policies that re-enforce the colonial power dynamics and choosing to recruit and promote more “white” Western people over POC and local experts.

Such phenomena have led our organisation, DR, to conduct a survey on the decolonization of the global health sector. The survey reveals that, from the survey participant donor-based organisations that operate in southern regions, only 16% of their senior leadership is locally recruited while from the respondent organizations working directly in the field, 80% operate a dual salary system for local experts. Moreover, the survey indicates that 53% of the participant organisations are fully or mostly funded by donors. This high reliance on donor funding prevents them from bringing up decolonial and racist issues due to the fact that organisations are afraid this might result in losing donor funding – which further translates into losing their incomes and livelihoods. It is therefore evident that these multiple “forms” of racism which take place in the aid sector fall far behind from meeting the globally accepted humanitarian principles of *neutrality, independence and impartiality* - which are undoubtedly a driving force for creating diverse, inclusive and equal communities.

4. International organisation’s practices related to diversity and inclusion

Within this “racist environment”, someone would logically ask “*where do international organisations stand in terms of issues related to diversity and inclusion?*” Despite the fact that international aid organisations such as the United Nations (UN) have long been associated with struggles for racial justice and equal rights, a deeper look into the UN’s workforce reveals that the world body has failed to embrace and incorporate equality, diversity and inclusion into its own system. Albeit being the world’s most diverse institution – with over 193 member states-, the UN still employs more people from the US than from any other country - 2,531 or 6.75% of its staff.¹ These figures are even more disappointing when looking at the UN’s emergency relief agency - the *Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)*. Although most of the agency’s operations take place in Asia and Africa, the vast majority of the senior staff working at OCHA come from Western countries while in the past 13 years, the agency was led by 4 former British government officials.² Additionally, 54% of UN posts at the humanitarian offices worldwide are held by nationals from Western countries - which is more than the positions held by nationals from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe combined(!).³ Furthermore, evidence of the staff working at the UN’s New York headquarters reveal that Western nationals cover 71% of the well-paid and senior level jobs while the majority of the field jobs in conflict zones are left for the people coming from the global South.⁴ This serious problem

¹ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3809594>

² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/16/un-diversity-problem-workforce-western-ocha/>

³ *ibid*

of the global South's underrepresentation at the UN system as well as the racist and discriminatory behaviors taking place in the aid sector have even drawn the attention of the UN's Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, who recently said: *"Let's not fool ourselves. The legacy of colonialism still reverberates". "It's a delusion to believe that we live in a post-racist world" when we are surrounded by "hate crimes and xenophobia, institutionalised racism and white supremacy"*.⁵

Racism in the aid sector continues to be fed by present-day discourse and unequal power dynamics. "Poverty porn" images – used mainly by NGOs to receive funding - that depict POC suffering and starving to death as well as narratives related to the idea of "white saviorism", undoubtedly perpetuate the notion of white supremacy. Furthermore, the idea that white aid workers are innocent, trustworthy and inherently good people because they sacrifice their lives to help poor POC, just prevent us from realizing that such ideas around the "disempowerment" of POC strengthen the unequal power relations between the global North and global South and further fuel "white gaze" in the aid sector.

Source: TRT World



5. The paths forward

In light of this situation and in an era where diversity and equality are receiving mounting attention in multiple industries, the question that arises is *"How can aid actors (including international organisations, donor countries/governments, NGOs, private sector organisations) be actively anti-racist?"*. Similar to what has happened in other industries (i.e., law, sports, retail industry), the aid community should review its own structures and explore how its own policies can help combat racism and "build back better" in the wake of COVID-19.

In order to achieve this, the aid actors should adopt the following set of four wills/commitments that will help organisations drive real change. This framework is based on the experience of the CEO, a Person of Colour (POC), an African, and a development practitioner who has worked for a government development agency, the UN, private sector, and an NGO. Using this experience, DR suggest organisations operating in the aid sector should be committed to:

- a) being anti-racist;
- b) being a diverse employer;
- c) delivering anti-racist development programs; and
- d) building diverse supply chains.

With regards to being anti-racist, development and humanitarian organisations should call out racism whenever it is seen or reported and immediately take action against it. Moreover, they should strengthen country and local ownership while also educating their staff about individual and institutional racism. Finally, aid practitioners should remove and cancel any racist content and racist decision that they have taken in the past and provide customized whistleblowing procedures for POC staff, consultants and clients to report issues around racism – including matters related to career progression and microaggressions.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/annual-lecture-2020-secretary-general-guterres-full-speech>

When considering the commitment to become a diverse employer, aid organisations should urgently put in place targets to increase the percentages of POC staff working in country offices or in headquarters– including board and senior staff. In addition, they should commit to eliminate POC pay gaps at all staff levels while also end unpaid internships and replace them with entry-level paid fellowships for POCs. Furthermore, aid agencies should publicize all consultancy positions that open and of course use blind sifting processes during the recruitment process. Finally, like the case of Save the Children⁶, organisations in the aid sector should provide the resources to create or strengthen employee representative groups for POC staff and involve them in difficult discussions about racism and its manifestation in the industry – external and internal.

Coming down to the commitment of delivering anti-racist development programmes, humanitarian and development organisations need to challenge the perceptions of “us” and “them” when designing their development programmes and instead use the principle of universality. Additionally, they should introduce bespoke anti-institutional racism training for all staff and ensure that they use global and headquarter-based evidence when designing and implementing their development programmes. Similarly, aid actors should refrain from using categories such as Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA - which are not used by those regions - and also refrain from using artificial divisions such as developed/developing countries in their evidence and analysis. What is more, in order to deliver anti-racist programmes, organisations cannot only ensure that a target percentage of business cases and programmes are designed, approved and evaluated by POCs but they can also cancel any panel discussions, consultations or dialogues that do not have a target percentage POC representation on them. Last but not least, the aid community need to ensure that their organisations, country programmes/strategies and development programmes clearly outline a responsible and locally empowering exit strategy.

Finally, in order to build diverse supply chains, aid actors should first ensure that the organisations and people they outsource – either from the private sector, external consultants, non-governmental or local organisations, think tanks etc. – are as anti-racist as they are. Likewise, they can ensure that a target percentage (or a majority) of their outsourced programs are delivered by organisations led by POCs and that their suppliers have a target percentage (or a majority) of POC in all their expert teams. Furthermore, aid actors should identify, champion and nurture 3-4 POC-led private sector organisations that are registered in each country that they operate in and lastly ensure that a target percentage (or a majority) of their outsourced contract spent annually is delivered by POC-led contractors.

Building a comprehensive strategy or framework is key

In addition to the aforementioned recommendations, and in order to address racism in the aid sector, the UK Government, and in particular FCDO, should further develop a clear strategy/framework that will aim to remove racism and colonizing practices from the aid sector’s system of governance. In particular, the UK Government together with FCDO and the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities must develop certain regulations that will require from UK NGOs, charities and private sector organisations to annually report their progress when it comes to increasing the percentages of POC employees, eliminating POC dual salary systems for local experts, strengthening employee representative groups for POC staff and organising training sessions and seminars on how to recognize and eradicate racist behaviors.

Moreover, apart from continuously training and educating civil servants and aid workers on anti-institutional racism, the UK Government should also bolster safeguarding in the aid sector. One way to achieve this is by making it mandatory for the organisations they fund ((I)NGOs, charities) as well as

⁶ <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2020/blm-solidarity-statement-charity-leadership-team>

for private sector organisations to create platforms through which POC staff can report – anonymously if preferred – any issues and behaviors related to racism. Furthermore, the UK Government, in particular FCDO, should further develop policies that require the above aid actors to register basic details of anyone involved in aid or development projects.⁷ More specifically, this data base⁸ should include information about each aid worker’s employment history and identity, background checks, employing organisations as well as all negative/positive feedback received from previous and current employers. By giving potential employers/development organisations the chance to access this data base and learn more about each individual’s employment history, aid workers, on the one hand, will refrain from adopting racist behaviors while offenders on the other, will no longer be able to move around the aid sector undetected – as happened in the Oxfam scandal.⁹ This “system” will not only bring transparency and accountability in the aid sector but will also ensure that any racist behavior is wiped out and “punished”.

6. The benefits of tackling racism

“Decolonizing aid” and changing paternalistic notions of what constitutes “progress”, using local knowledge and expertise to implement projects, increasing local ownership, as well as embracing diversity and combating discrimination and inequalities can help strengthen the relations between aid delivery organisations (such as FCDO) and recipient communities. A systemic approach to tackling racism will inaugurate a new paradigm shift in the aid sector. This paradigm shift will eliminate the notions of “white supremacy”, “white gaze”, “poverty porn” and “aid dependency” and will gradually allow local agencies to combine forces with Western organisations in order to drive real progress.

Racism in the aid sector is real, highly complex, and inextricably intertwined with how funding and aid are organised and delivered. Therefore, the whole aid community must realise that if we really want to make progress on development and other global challenges, we must grapple with the issues of racism because silence on the issue merely serves to entrench the problem. The recent protests and calls for action from the Black Lives Matter movement provide the international development community with a one-time opportunity to “build back better” in the wake of COVID-19. It is now time for donor countries, northern governments, international as well as private sector organisations, NGOs and charities to have a hard look in the mirror, reflect on their own blind spots and come up with solutions to address their racist practices that have been besetting the aid sector for decades.

As a leading development partner, the UK Government, has the opportunity to champion this change and spur much needed action by all those involved in the aid community.

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⁷ <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2020/07/how-do-we-build-an-aid-worker-register-to-prevent-sexual-abuse>

⁸ To overcome the legal issues that may rise related to who owns the database and who has the right to share the employment history of thousands of aid workers, this platform can operate with the use of blockchain technology, which stores data online in millions of locations simultaneously - meaning that no one owns it and it is protected from hackers (Retrieved from: <https://www.devex.com/news/could-a-global-register-of-aid-workers-prevent-sexual-abuse-93596>)

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-56670162>