

## **Response to International Development Committee sub-inquiry on racism in the aid sector**

Plan International UK, April 2021

Plan International UK welcomes this inquiry from the IDC as an important opportunity to reflect on the impact of racism and the legacy of colonialism in the international development and humanitarian sector, how this affects the impact of the sector's work, and how we can take action to address it. We hope this will help drive further momentum for urgent change.

**About Plan International UK:** Plan International UK is a global children's organisation, working for children's rights and equality for girls through international development and humanitarian action. We work with children growing up in some of the world's poorest communities, making sure they have access to the education, health care, clean water and future opportunities they need to thrive. Working as part of the global Plan International family, we operate in more than 50 countries around the world across Africa, Asia and the Americas, as well as here in the UK.

### **Summary:**

- The impacts of colonialism, and related ideas about race, are still highly evident in global power structures, governance and decision-making, including within the aid sector. Despite some recognition of the need to shift power and decision-making to communities and organisations in lower income countries, there has been limited change.
- Practically, this in turn limits the ability of the sector, including donors, international NGOs (INGOs) and others, to achieve the impacts it seeks.
- Racism is a human rights violation. Institutional racism in the aid sector and in wider society undermines the sector's ability to deliver impact for the people and communities it seeks to serve, and leads to harm.
- Racism, and its intersection with discrimination against other identities such as sex and gender, directly undermines safeguarding.
- Being actively anti-racist requires ongoing, concerted action led from the top to understand and root out systemic racism across all areas of the sector and its external work, and in all parts of the sector including governments and other donors, INGOs, UN agencies and others.
- Donors including the UK Government have a critical role to play in actively adopting and implementing efforts to shift power, tackle systemic racism and promote diversity and inclusion, including in what it funds and how it spends aid, and in other policy areas. The current UK aid cuts are being decided and implemented in a way that is the opposite of what is needed. With the Government's ambitions to continue to be seen as a "global leader" they need to do far more to recognise and take action on anti-racism and decolonisation.

- The Government should deliver on its commitments under the Grand Bargain, and increase the proportion of funding provided directly to local and national civil society organisations, including youth-led and women and girls' rights organisations.
- Diversity and inclusion in all institutions and organisations that are part of the aid sector is crucial to enable change. Plan International is committed to increasing the diversity of our workforce, creating a more inclusive culture and shifting power as part of tackling systemic racism and decolonising the sector.
- Plan International, including Plan International UK have taken a range of actions over the last year including adopting and starting to implement a global Anti-Racism Action Plan, embedding anti-racism and equity principles in discussions across all the areas of our work as part of the development of our next global strategy, and taking steps to start to shift power and increase diversity in our internal leadership and governance. However, our actions to date are just the start of a journey and we are committed to concerted, ongoing action to create the change that is needed.

## Section 1: Structure of the aid sector

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

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

- The impacts of colonialism are still highly evident in global economic, political and social power structures of today<sup>1</sup>, and the international aid sector is not exempt from this. The historical roots of the international development and humanitarian sector are closely intertwined with colonialism<sup>2</sup>, when ideas about 'race' that still hold sway today were also developed<sup>3</sup>.
- The power structures within the current international development sector still reflect the power structures resulting from colonialism, whereby governments, organisations and staff based in the 'global north' - White-majority affluent countries - have more power and influence over what happens in lower income countries, many of which are former colonised states. Practically, this means that donors, organisations and staff in or dominated by White-majority affluent countries hold the primary decision-making power over what is funded, how it is funded, and what is not.
- It also means that ideas, ways of thinking and social constructs developed in those countries have become the dominant globally accepted norms; success,

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney, W. (2012). How Europe underdeveloped Africa. Fahamu/Pambazuka

<sup>2</sup> 'The Humanitarian Global Color Line': Michael Barnett, University Professor of International Affairs and Political Science George Washington University <https://www.alnap.org/blogs/the-humanitarian-global-colour-line> (accessed 26.04.21)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human/The-history-of-the-idea-of-race>

development and ‘what good looks like’ are defined through this lens. These norms have become deeply embedded, structural, and are perpetuated within our societies, with different forms of knowledge or ways of defining success accorded less value.

- There has been longstanding recognition within the sector of the need to better integrate the knowledge and perspectives of affected communities in determining how aid is spent in order to ensure the greatest impact and sustainability of interventions. However, all too often consultation is not meaningful and doesn’t provide those communities with genuine power or ability to hold organisations to account, therefore leading to limited change. Emphasis is rarely on communities’ own leadership and design of interventions, and examples of wider shifts in organisational governance<sup>4</sup> are limited.
- There have been some efforts to shift governance to place more power and funding in the hands of people and organisations based in the global south. For example the ‘localisation’ agenda has recognised that failures to engage with local communities, and to invest in local and national capacities in recipient countries have undermined the effectiveness of humanitarian response. The UK Government and others signed up to the 2016 Grand Bargain<sup>5</sup> which includes commitments to reinforce rather than undermine local and national capacities, including by providing more humanitarian funding to local and national responders, with a target for 2020 of at least 25% of international humanitarian assistance being passed to local and national actors as directly as possible.
- However, despite commitments on paper, systemic change has been extremely slow. In 2019, international humanitarian assistance sent directly to local and national actors as a proportion of all international humanitarian assistance stood at only 2.1% – and this was a decrease from 3.5% in 2018. Absolute volumes sent directly to local and national actors also dropped significantly in 2019, down 30% from 2016 when the Grand Bargain target was set<sup>6</sup>.
- Beyond aid, lower income countries and their populations are deeply impacted by trade, finance, climate change-related and other areas where there remains a huge power imbalance between more and less affluent countries. For example, analysis shows that despite aid spending, more money flows from more affluent to less affluent countries, than the other way around – that “for every \$1 of aid that developing countries receive, they lose \$24 in net outflows.”<sup>7</sup> Those least responsible for climate change experience the worst impacts, and also have the least power to address it<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/02/3-ways-ngos-and-donors-are-shifting-power-through-governance>

<sup>5</sup> <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

<sup>6</sup> Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020, <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/jan/14/aid-in-reverse-how-poor-countries-develop-rich-countries>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/Hunger-strike-climate-and-food-vulnerability->

- The process around this Inquiry is in itself an example of approaches that do not allow for sufficient consultation or input from many of those who are most affected by racism in the aid sector, with a short timescale that does not allow for wider consultation for example with aid programme participants or partners, and assumes ready technical access. This problem is reflected in many other global policy forums including UN processes.

## Section 2: Racism in the aid sector

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

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

- Racism is a human rights violation. Any form of racially based discrimination has no place anywhere in society, especially within the aid sector. Structural racism is rooted and therefore prevalent within the international development and humanitarian sector, as it is in wider society. In particular over the last year we have heard many voices which have demonstrated that this is the case with all of its negative impacts on individuals, on organisations and on the ability of the sector to achieve the impacts it seeks. This is unacceptable.
- Racism, and its intersection with discrimination against other identities such as sex and gender, directly undermines safeguarding. Effective safeguarding in organisations requires a culture that promotes safeguarding for all children, youth, and adult programme participants and staff in all their diversity. This requires taking on the responsibility to 'do no harm' to those we work with and our colleagues including by recognising the direct impact and implications that power, privilege and bias have on our ability to safeguard, and fulfil peoples' rights.
- The existence of structural racism in international development and humanitarian organisations, as in wider society, and discrimination against Black and Indigenous people and People of Colour (BIPOC) and with other marginalised identities means that people with one or more of those intersecting identities are often consciously or unconsciously discriminated against, held to different standards and find it harder to receive credibility or recognition for their work. Organisations and interventions in turn miss out on the perspectives, knowledge and contribution of people with diverse identities, lessening our impact.
- Racism is related to power structures in wider society and in the aid sector as described above, whereby decision-making power is held primarily by donors and organisations in White-majority affluent countries. Within those organisations' offices in affluent countries, BIPOC are severely under-represented among staff, especially at senior levels. Voices from marginalised identities, including BIPOC staff, staff from lower income countries and communities in which aid is being delivered, are under-represented in decision-making. The less that the views,

needs and solutions from communities in which interventions are made are directly implemented, the less likely it is that programmes will have the impacts that they seek to achieve, the less sustainable they are, and the more likely it is that they cause harm. This undermines the aid sector's ability to deliver for those we work with and for.

### 2.3 How can aid actors be actively anti-racist?

- Given how deep-rooted racism is in the aid sector, as it is in wider society, being actively anti-racist means looking at and understanding the impact of racism across all areas of our work and taking proactive action to address it. This needs ongoing, resourced, concerted efforts, led by those with the most decision-making power, to acknowledge that racism exists, its colonial roots and its impacts, and what actions to address these already exist and need supporting. This includes within governments and other donors, INGOs, UN agencies and other aid sector actors. Key areas needing attention include, among others:
- Leadership, governance and decision-making: Reviewing and changing decision-making structures and representation especially at senior leadership level, to move away from governance and decision-making being dominated by majority White and affluent country voices. This includes recognising and actively seeking to dismantle the power structures in the aid sector that marginalise the voices of BIPOC. Leadership and governance composition and ways of working should reflect the diversity of the people we serve.
- Programming interventions: Ensuring the way the sector designs, delivers and evaluates programmes and other interventions is deeply informed and held accountable by the communities we serve, including at a minimum ensuring that the voices of BIPOC and people with other more marginalised identities are heard and implemented within this process, but ideally that those people should lead them; and that donor funding requirements support this.
- Partnerships: Commitment from donors, INGOs and others in the aid sector to work in a way that supports the strengthening and not undermining of local and national organisations, including women and girls' rights organisations, and working with them as equal partners, recognising that local experience and expertise is far greater, and strengthening national organisations is a key part of creating sustainable change. More funding needs to be delivered directly to local and national organisations, with approaches that make this accessible, including for youth-led groups.
- Elevating local/national and BIPOC expertise: Recognising the validity of different forms of expertise, and supporting local/national and BIPOC staff to advance in organisations.
- Funding: Donors should engage in discussion about and support eradication of structural racism through the way they provide funding and what they fund, including through rapidly accelerating delivery of commitments to the localisation agenda. Donors should ensure that compliance requirements and the way

funding is constructed do not pose insurmountable barriers to access or impose ways of working that undermine efforts to address systemic racism or support community leadership. For organisations, engaging donors in conversations about how to eradicate structural racism is essential.

- Language and communications: Review and rule out use of language and images across the aid sector's communications which inherently reflects structural racism, as described in section 2.4. Organisational fundraising models and approaches need to review and root out practices that perpetuate systemic racism.
- Honesty and openness: To dismantle racism, it is essential to ensure ongoing openness and honesty about relationships, and the structure and history of the international aid sector and the inherent cycles of privilege and power. Also, that tackling this and sharing of power at all levels is vital to achieving our missions of eradicating poverty and marginalisation and achieving sustainable development.

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

- Commonly used language, images, stories and other forms of communication and portrayal used in the aid sector inherently reflect the structural racism and imbalances of power that exist in the sector and in wider society.
- For example, it has been widely recognised in discussions over recent years that sector communications often use a 'white gaze' in the way that people in aid-recipient countries are portrayed, or rely on 'white saviourism' to raise money from the public<sup>9</sup>. The term 'beneficiaries' is the language of welfare and dependance and promotes a mindset of internalised oppression for aid recipients. The terms 'global north' and 'global south' themselves are categories borne of a European/White-centric world view. Terminology that reinforces the idea of a 'top to bottom' approach with programme participants at the bottom should be avoided.
- Language plays a key role in either reinforcing or challenging racism and unequal power structures, and therefore recognising where it reinforces these and finding alternative ways of communicating is an important part of dismantling racism.

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

- The UK Government is a dominant actor in the aid sector, as a funder and influential global power. The Government must recognise the existence of structural racism and the impacts of colonialism embedded within the power structures in society, including the aid sector, within the UK Government and FCDO itself, and in the UK's relationships with the rest of the world. The Government should reflect and seek input from others to better understand

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<sup>9</sup> For example: <https://metro.co.uk/2019/03/06/what-is-a-white-saviour-complex-8793979/>

racism and the impacts of colonialism in international development and humanitarian action, its own role, and what it can do to address it. The FCDO should develop a vision and strategy for addressing this, led from the top.

- This includes committing to change the way aid is provided, and other UK policies such as trade to prevent negative impacts for communities and for sustainable, equitable development.
- Eradicating systemic racism and shifting power imbalances is essential to maximising the impact of the UK Government, and of organisations that it funds, for sustainable development and poverty eradication in the countries where aid is delivered.
- The Government, and other donors, should ensure that decisions on what to fund and how to fund it are informed by and ideally led by people and communities whose lives that funding is seeking to improve, and local and national civil society. Funding should be allocated to programmes whose design and implementation are led by local civil society and impacted communities.
- Flexible funding with timelines and funding levels that allow for this are crucial. For example, all too often, funding for work with girl-led groups is short-term, limiting impact, and there is a lack of funding accessible directly to girl-led groups. The 2018 IDC Inquiry into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector found that “Donors cannot expect aid organisations to integrate safeguarding into their programmes without the resource to do so.”<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, donors including the UK Government must ensure that funding levels and approaches support inclusive and anti-racist approaches, to ensure that programmes can maximise sustainable impact.
- The current UK aid cuts are being decided and implemented in a way that is the opposite of what is needed – decision-making is top-down and with barely any consultation. This is leading to mistreatment of partnerships between the UK Government, and organisations and communities that are in receipt of its funding either directly or indirectly. Within aid-recipient organisations, the cuts are likely to have the most impact on staff based within country programmes or small local and national partner organisations. With less funding available, and an approach that is not respectful of partnership, these cuts will make integrating an anti-racist – and more impactful - approach with more decision-making, and direct funding, sitting with local and national responders and communities, harder not easier to deliver. A more responsible and respectful approach to their implementation should be taken, and the cuts should be reversed as soon as possible.
- The Government should deliver on its commitments under the Grand Bargain, and increase the proportion of funding provided directly to local and national civil society organisations, including youth-led and women and girls’ rights organisations.
- The Government should adopt anti-racist language and communications approaches and show leadership around this.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/840/840.pdf>

- The recent G7 Summit, of which Plan International was a part, set out recommendations for an ‘agenda for racial justice’ in its communique to G7 leaders including the UK<sup>11</sup>:
  - *“G7 leaders should issue a statement expressing their collective commitment to address each nation's historic role perpetuating racial injustice, acknowledge and address the consequences of these historical injustices and how they manifest in inequalities both within and between countries. Leaders should also respond positively to calls for reparations - as a means of accountability and justice.*
  - *As a starting point to correcting these inequities, double the share of G7 ODA that flows directly to organisations in the global South by 2023 and review ODA procurement rules across G7 countries to ensure companies and organisations from the global South do not face unnecessary barriers in bidding for contracts with G7 development agencies.*
  - *Review and strengthen procurement rules from all G7 development and foreign relations agencies to ensure that companies and organisations in the global South do not face systematic barriers to bidding for development contracts”.*

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

- As noted in Section 2, systemic racism means a less safe and inclusive culture for staff, partners and for people and communities with whom the sector works; it means that communities where programmes are delivered are not sufficiently engaged as participants or primary stakeholders in the design and delivery of programmes; and that local and national organisations which are first-line and expert responders in their communities are not sufficiently directly funded. Therefore, addressing these areas, would do a lot to strengthen relationships, trust and sustainable impact.

### Section 3: Diversity and inclusion

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

- Diversity and inclusion in all institutions and organisations that are part of the aid sector is crucial to enable change.
- The 2019 ACEVO pay and equality survey for the UK charity sector showed that the charity sector as a whole, including the international development sector, has a long way to go in being an inclusive place for People of Colour<sup>12</sup>. Those in

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/c7\\_communique-recommendations.pdf](https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/c7_communique-recommendations.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> It showed only 3% of CEOs are people of colour, 54% of staff who are people of colour have experienced racism at work, and Black workers with degrees earn on average 23.1% less than White workers.



positions of power in NGOs do not reflect the profile of the communities they work in and the levels of representation are not changing quickly.

- Within Plan International UK, which is based in London, 66% of staff are from White backgrounds, 16% are from BAME backgrounds, 16.5% have not provided information about their ethnic origin, and 1.5% have stated that they prefer not to provide this information.
- We are committed to addressing this lack of diversity, especially ensuring greater diversity in senior leadership and on our Trustee Board, and are developing a Diversity and Inclusion action plan to address this.

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

- In this section we will provide information about Plan International's key actions to date related to diversity, inclusion and anti-racism.
- Our vision is for an organisation where all individuals in all their diversity, including their racial and ethnic identity, feel safe, respected, included and valued. We are committed to rooting out structural racism, inequities, systemic oppression and all other forms of discrimination within our work.
- We know we have a long journey ahead of us to achieve this, but we are dedicated to meaningfully advancing racial justice within Plan International and throughout our sector. We will not stop until people in all their diversity feel safe, respected, included, and valued in their engagement with us and with others.
- Plan International UK supports, engages with and works to implement actions and plans developed by the Plan International secretariat for the Plan family as whole, of which we work as a constituent part.
- In Plan International globally actions to date include:
  - Adoption of an Anti-Racism Action Plan (June 2020), Anti-Racism and Equity Principles and Vision with structural mechanisms to support their ongoing implementation and further development. These include:
    - An Anti-Racism and Equity Council with 28 members representing a diverse range of BIPOC staff across Plan International, supported by the Leadership Team and sponsored by an International Board member.
    - An Anti-Racism Steering Committee of senior leaders of functional areas is accountable for putting the vision, principles and standards into practice in their areas of work.
    - Regional anti-racism action task force groups will drive forward anti-racism work and initiatives within the regions.
    - A new post of anti-racism programme lead will oversee implementation of Plan International's Anti-Racism Action Plan.
    - A new global Programmes working group will develop a set of actions to foster anti-racist and decolonial programmes and research interventions.

- A set of Intersectional Equity, Justice and Inclusion standards will help teams to operationalise the vision and principles.
- In late 2020, Our Global Secretariat was restructured in order to start to address some of the issues of power imbalance. The leadership of the organisation was de-centralised moving significant functions historically managed in the secretariat in higher income countries to our Regional Leaders, who were also made a core part of the Global Leadership team. The aim of this was to move decision-making power closer to the point of delivery, and help diversify the Leadership Team.
- Plan International started delivering internal workshops on 'Exploring Power, Privilege and Bias' in 2016, led by our Safeguarding Unit in order to support the ongoing development of a safe culture and environment for all staff, programme participants, partners and communities in which we work. The rollout of these workshops has been further stepped up in the last year; specific anti-racism sessions are currently being piloted and will be developed to address other identities. A 'Courageous Conversations About Race' Toolkit has been developed on challenging microaggressions and initiating discussions on Anti-Racism work.
- Ongoing prioritisation of embedding Safe Programming and Influencing safeguarding measures ensuring protection of children, young people and adult programme participants in all their diversity.
- A new section was included in 2020 in our Global Employee Engagement Survey (Sept 2020) on gender, equality, diversity and inclusion, to help us better understand racism and its impact in our organisation.
- We are embedding anti-racism and equity principles in the current development of Plan International's next Global Strategy (2022-27).
- An anti-racist language glossary and recommendations for our wider communications are being developed.
- In relation to our work with partners, we have for example committed that at least 25% of our own humanitarian funding will be passed to national and local NGOs by the end of our next Global Strategy period, and that we will budget for and fairly fund our partners' organisational support costs and capacity building, as well as a number of other commitments to support, and enhance the visibility of, local and national organisations including youth-led organisations and those focused on girls' rights. We are taking part in regular conversations at senior leadership level in the sector to consider how we as organisations can take more transformative action for change.
- In addition to the above, within Plan International UK, actions to date include:
  - Adoption of a new People and Culture framework (2021) to transform our culture, focusing on the themes of inclusion, empowerment, wellbeing, agility, building trust and promoting accountability and compliance. This includes a set of interlocking pillars among them Diversity and Inclusion, Safeguarding & Building

a Safer Culture, Embedding our values and Value-Based Leadership based on feminist leadership principles.

- We are developing a Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan setting out a three year programme for achieving long-term sustainable change for a more diverse workforce and inclusive culture.
- Staff have established a new equality working group to champion change.
- Developing anti-racist and decolonising language guidelines and brand principles, drawing on the work being done in Plan International globally, as well as on discussions and guidelines developed within the UK-based international development sector coordinated by Bond.
- Consideration and development of plans for taking an anti-racist and decolonising approach in other areas of our work such as policy and advocacy.

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

- These actions outlined in 3.2 are just the beginning and we will need continued openness, honesty, reflection and concerted commitment to ensure that these translate to the diverse, inclusive and anti-racist culture that we aspire to in our organisations, in our external work, and across the international development and humanitarian sectors. This will be an ongoing journey rather than a one-off plan, which involves challenging and changing deeply embedded and longstanding structures and mindsets both within our organisations and also within the wider aid sector and society.

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

- Donors, including the FCDO, are powerful actors within the aid sector and therefore it is vital that they support diversity and inclusion, including anti-racism in the organisations they fund. Our recommendations on this point are captured in section 2.3 and 2.5.

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