

Introduction to REDI Collective

REDI is a community Interest company with a network based in LinkedIn. The Racial Equity Diversity and Inclusion Collective works with people of colour and ethnic minorities working in UK International Development.

We support people of colour working in International Development, allies who wish to take action, and with organisations who are willing to address systemic issues within. We have worked with Devex and British Expertise to facilitate discussions on race issues in our sector. We meet on a monthly basis with EDI champion from UK based International Development organisation to share challenges and progress.

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

The aid sector, as the offspring of colonisation has inherent power imbalances. Although there are many academic and opinion sources that can be quoted to argue this, [this article sums up some of the issues](#).

This reality is perpetuated through programme design and delivery as well as within the aid organisations as microcosms of wider society.

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

Aid is commercialised and businesses who win work in the UK aid sector are led by white leadership teams who implement programmes in the Global South. These processes are often uninformed by local actors and the needs of beneficiaries are secondary, hereby perpetuating the power imbalances.

Charities and International actors that should be dismantling systems of oppression and exploitation are behind the curve with very few people of colour in leadership roles, leading to unsustainable interventions and blind spots that could be avoided by valuing lived experiences and being led by local partners.

How can aid actors be actively anti-racist?

Firstly Anti-racism means taking active stands, engaging in difficult conversations with leaders.

Secondly, by dispersing power from UK-based organisations and build leadership capacity in the Global South so that our teams reflect the diversity of the communities we serve. This means we have to be intentional about localisation.

Thirdly, by requiring diversity within the leadership of UK-based organisations and the leading roles for programme implementation. This could be monitored by ethnicity reporting not just across the organisation but within senior leadership teams.

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

Language use maintains a North- South divide and paternalistic attitudes when in fact the relationships are much more nuanced. There are people of colour, migrants from the Southern countries and grandchildren of Empire, all working within aid organisations. We have found that language disempowers and 'others' local and national partners by perpetuating a 'white saviour' narrative where knowledge and resources must be exported to 'recipients' or 'beneficiaries'.

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

UK government should look internally within its own organisation and assess the culture, the diversity & inclusion, and how it can be a role model for aid sector suppliers.

It should take specific preventative and remedial actions in its programme design and performance assessment. Take concrete measures to critically examine the practices and objectives of its programming and include southern partners in the conversation.

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

Our members have reported that covid-19 has led to more opportunities and even necessity to work with local delivery partners. Many implementing partners and local employees have demonstrated their abilities to take on leadership roles and work with greater autonomy. A systematic approach to racism could help build on this: where progress is driven together, innovation is shared and implementation of objectives happens in partnership.

Rather than requiring that partners adopt a western model of programme delivery which strict adherence to numerical indicators, progress could be based on indigenous knowledge and rooted in local culture with a focus on sustainable outcomes that survive the project lifecycle.

Diversity and inclusion

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

Racial diversity may be seen in more junior roles and in international project offices but decision-making power is concentrated amongst white leadership teams.

Our members report that diversity figures can be skewed by including staff in majority ethnic countries for projects, but this isn't reflected in the UK-based operations.

Experience, anecdotes, comments and inputs from our members

- Women of colour (WoC) occupy many of the junior roles and some members would resonate with having other privileges such as class, education and economic privileges and being the 'model minority'.
- Anecdotes from WoC in our network suggest that there is a 'white glass ceiling', where white, male or white female colleagues will progress to director level, whilst the WoC, seeing no further scope for progression become independent consultants. WoC suggested that whilst they were advocating for diversity within their organisations and engaging in extracurricular activities, 'speaking up' lead to them being 'pushed out'.
- Members suggested it was rare to find british black males within the organisation.
- In programme recruitment, members suggested that it was a struggle to advocate the recruitment of non-white male team leaders, and where it was possible, expatriation conversations and negotiations were tougher with connotations of those hired being 'less deserving'.

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

Some have made statements of solidarity and expressed their intention to tackle racism internally, beginning with employee engagement surveys and appointing working groups with champions to review the outcomes and key issues raised.

Stronger organisations or those willing to direct resources to improving their practices have appointed D&I leads with time allocated for billable work and committed to greater transparency in reporting e.g. Ethnicity Pay Gap reporting. Other activities mentioned by our members include:

- Review of diversity at of corporate leadership levels;
- Assessment of HR policies and recruitment practices;
- Tightening or creation of policies and reporting mechanisms, support for employee wellbeing
- Unconscious bias training and other trainings and initiatives to increase staff awareness.

Impact has been limited by:

- Reviews may be heavily UK or US centric, with limited consideration of 'essential power shifts to the Global South'
- Those leading and carrying out these actions tend to be people of colour, who often do the work without remuneration.
- Fundamental organisational cultures need to shift to build a more inclusive aid sector, and this may not be seen as a priority amongst the many other challenges facing the sector eg. Cuts to the aid budget.
- Lack of good modelling by amongst donor organisations or clients of what good diversity and inclusion practice should be like.

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

They need to increase their transparency of D&I practices e.g. making policies available on external websites, prioritising local implementation of programming.

They need to value and invest in the knowledge and expertise of marginalized and minoritised groups at the corporate level.

They need to be the change they wish to see and grow organisations more reflective of the countries they work with, engaging in more equal, less extractive partnerships.

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

Firstly, there is a need to recognise the colonial legacy that UK aid has with the entrenched prejudices that come with that history.

Secondly, raise awareness amongst FCDO staff through training and include D&I responsibilities within Terms of Reference for Team Leaders. It must go beyond a box-ticking exercise and address the

underlying factors that have enabled power imbalances between aid actors and implementing partners in the Global South to persist.

The FCDO must keep the spotlight on this issue until wide-spread, concerted efforts are being taken to address this issue at all levels of the sector.

Introduce practices and procedures to tackle this problem to which improve involvement of local partners. Preferential attitudes have hindered progress in tackling this issue, as well as sustained disparities and most recent cuts to aid expenditure. Local partners and staff from diverse backgrounds need to be empowered and involved more directly in aid delivery.

Race, power and privilege are sensitive topics that require nuanced discussion and a commitment by those engaged to educate themselves. Although we welcome an inquiry that looks into such an important issue, our members would have wanted the discussion to begin at, 'What can be done about racism? Rather than 'Does racism exist in the aid sector? We believe that this topic will require further engagement across multiple channels:

Suggestions:

- Focus group discussions and engagement with Gold Suppliers or FCDO programmes as well as advocacy groups such as REDI Collective; Charity So White, Racial Equity Index, Diasporic Development.
- Reaching out directly to CEOs and MDs of Gold Suppliers to FCDO to respond, as the responsibility of responding to this inquiry regularly rests on people of colour (often with no compensation or acknowledgement of racial trauma), and is seen as a 'PoC problem'.
- Many of the questions posed through the call for evidence are broad, with large bodies of research already available. Work with Universities that have decolonizing development study modules, to apply the abundance of theory, especially existing research from academics in the Global South, to practice.