

ICRC Submission to the International Development Committee's inquiry: The Philosophy and Culture of Aid: Racism in the Aid Sector

About the ICRC

1. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organisation whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening international humanitarian law (IHL) and universal humanitarian principles.
2. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, alongside the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and national societies around the world, including the British Red Cross.
3. The ICRC directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

Racism and the ICRC

"We need to do more, and we need to be better."

- Robert Mardini, Director General, ICRC, and Jagan Chapagain, Secretary General, IFRC¹

4. As in many humanitarian organisations with Western origins, the Black Lives Matter and other anti-racism protests which followed the murder of George Floyd last summer compelled the ICRC to open up new dialogues on racism.² Since then, over a thousand members of staff across the globe have participated in forums and discussions. They are some of the frankest conversations that the ICRC has had in its long history.
5. These conversations have at times been painful and uncomfortable and have revealed entrenched power imbalances and subtle, insidious and unconscious inequity engrained in our structures and history. Although discriminatory or racist behaviour is not tolerated under the ICRC Code of Conduct, it is clear that many members of staff feel race affects the extent to which people feel valued, are enabled to give their best and able to develop their careers.
6. Such discussions on racism – within the ICRC and other organisations - have also unearthed questions about the deep-seated power imbalances within the structure of the international aid system as well as within the humanitarian sector and individual organisations.³ Looking critically at racism, which is intrinsically linked to the asymmetric power dynamics present between donors, international aid organisations, local employees and local communities is a long overdue responsibility and an urgent priority.
7. For the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the debate on racism in the humanitarian sector also raises important questions about the application and interpretation of

¹ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement-statement-racism-discrimination>

² Ibid

³ See for example <https://odihpn.org/blog/is-racism-part-of-our-reluctance-to-localise-humanitarian-action/>

the Fundamental Principles which guide us.⁴ Rejection of any discrimination lies at the centre of our principles of humanity and impartiality. These are the standards we must hold ourselves to as a humanitarian movement to ensure that respect for human dignity remains at the core of all we do and that our work is guided solely by the needs of people affected by conflict and violence, without discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions.

8. The necessary, yet painful, debates of the past year confirm that principles of action are only relevant if they are translated into meaningful, responsible, and dignified action. With this in mind, the Movement has made a number of commitments:
 - At all levels, working to deliver the individual, structural and cultural change that will ensure no form of discrimination, intolerance or exclusion on racial or other grounds takes place within our organisations.
 - Building a supportive, safe and inclusive environment to continue to foster honest conversations around racism and discrimination. This includes encouraging difficult questions to improve mutual trust, respect and acceptance of each other's diversity. It also entails strengthening understanding and support for better practices within the Movement, enabling all to have their voices heard and respected. Working to remove any culture of fear or impunity is an important aspect of this.
 - Assisting victims of racism and racial discrimination and working actively with all stakeholders and partners at all levels to create the conditions to ensure the safety of all persons or communities affected by racism or discrimination on racial grounds.
 - Ensuring that our institutional frameworks and statutory commitments prevent and strictly prohibit any forms of racial discrimination, and that racism and discrimination are expressly prohibited behaviours in our Codes of Conduct.
 - Renewing our commitment to advancing the Fundamental Principles of our Movement, which aim for truly inclusive humanitarian action, and implementing activities that promote a spirit of racial tolerance.⁵
9. We are on a journey and we have a long way to go, but there is the intent and drive within our diverse, global organisation to push for positive change, as exhibited in this recent blog published by an ICRC law and policy adviser, Saman Rejali.⁶ We will continue to challenge ourselves as a Movement to uphold the Fundamental Principles and to ensure we are as inclusive and accessible as possible, “in words and deeds”.⁷

What needs to change?

Inclusive Programming

⁴ [The Fundamental Principles](#) are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

⁵ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement-statement-racism-discrimination>

⁶ <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/07/16/race-equity-neo-colonial-legacies-humanitarian/>

⁷ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement-statement-racism-discrimination>

“Diversity is the fact, inclusion is the act.”

- ICRC Inclusive Programming Report 2021⁸
10. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, with the ICRC, IFRC, 189 National Societies and 12 million volunteers around the world, is inherently diverse. Our response is at its best when we lean into the power of that diversity, by acting simultaneously at the local, national and international level to serve, assist and protect people affected by disaster and conflict.⁹ However, we recognise that although diversity is in our DNA, inclusion is something we must continue to prioritise, work on and develop, for the benefit of our staff and those we serve.
 11. For the ICRC, diversity and inclusion is closely linked with operational impact. Inclusive programming improves our response and ensures that we can reach and most effectively serve communities affected by conflict and violence. Some of the lessons we have learned are:
 - Sector-wide research suggests that more diverse and inclusive teams are more likely to listen to and include a diverse range of community members in programming.
 - When we combine diversity with inclusion, we get better results.
 - When we are working inclusively, we are mindful about not assuming what other people want or need, which helps us listen and co-create solutions with affected populations more effectively.
 - We must shift away from a perception of the "passive beneficiary" to affected people becoming agents of change in their own lives.
 - When we recognise communities' agency, they change us, the ICRC, and the humanitarian response.
 12. To achieve inclusive programming, we must create an inclusive working environment where everybody feels valued, respected and able to give their best regardless of cultural background, type of contract, physical abilities, race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. Understanding the intrinsic relationship between inclusive programming and diversity and inclusion in an organisation's workforce is key to remaining a relevant humanitarian actor in the future, as aspects such as recognition of people's multi-faceted identities, reinforced collaboration and local anchorage are growing increasingly important. To progress on this journey, actively listening and adjusting our ways of working to progressively improve people's experiences on inclusion are essential ingredients.¹⁰
 13. Ultimately, accountable, inclusive programming is based on local anchorage. A new ICRC report that gathers lessons learned from the pandemic, based on testimonies of affected people in conflict, highlights the need for "local expertise drawn from the affected communities and those with direct access to them" to "build an effective and holistic crisis response".¹¹ This builds on the work the ICRC has carried out over the past few years on ensuring better accountability to affected populations.¹² The pandemic has reaffirmed that inclusive humanitarian action must respect the affected person as an actor of change and not regard them as passive beneficiaries.

⁸ Humanitarian Advisory Group, *Final Assessment Report: Inclusive Programming in ICRC Operations*, Prepared for the ICRC, January 2021, p. 13 (internal)

⁹ <https://gblocalisation.ifrc.org/british-red-cross-the-case-for-complementarity/>

¹⁰ More information on our inclusion priorities can be made available to the Committee on request.

¹¹ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/as-if-war-was-not-enough>

¹² E.g. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/engaging-people-caught-conflict-icrc-hhi-launch-joint-discussion-paper>, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-presidents-address-community-engagement-and-accountability>

Inclusive engagement with affected people makes humanitarian action more dignified, inclusive, accountable, flexible, simpler and better value for money.

Representation and Communication

14. ICRC also recognises the importance of how we present communities affected by conflict and violence. Recent ICRC publications like 'As if the War Wasn't Enough' and 'A Decade of Loss' present the stories of those living with the reality of conflict in their own words.¹³ Through social media and other communications, we also aim to reflect the beauty and culture of the contexts we work in, especially where protracted conflict has dramatically shifted the public's perception and understanding of a country. As an organisation which is often present in conflict contexts for decades, we are keen to demonstrate the beauty and diversity of countries which others may not otherwise see.¹⁴
15. Guidance across the organisation also makes clear that our storytelling should not rely on stories that perpetuate stereotypes of the people and places where we work. Photo captions should include full names of the individuals and stories wherever possible (where there are no protection concerns) as a sign of respect and to promote public understanding of the reality of the situation, and any portrayal of people should be fair and respectful.

New Challenges

Doing no harm in the digital space

16. We must also anticipate the challenges to come, with relation to racism, diversity and inclusion in humanitarian response. Ensuring racism is tackled in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine-learning, which is becoming more central to state and institutional responses to conflict and crises, will be vital.
17. Acting to prevent racism in AI and machine learning must be an obligation in these rapidly shifting new frontiers. AI presents fantastic opportunities for efficient humanitarian action. For example, AI improves identification of missing persons through AI-based facial recognition and natural language processing. The ICRC uses these technologies to support its Central Tracing Agency to reunite family members separated by conflict by pioneering the *Trace the Face* website.¹⁵

¹³ <https://shop.icrc.org/as-if-the-war-was-not-enough-stories-of-hardship-and-resilience-in-times-of-covid-19-a-report-on-the-pandemic-s-impact-on-the-protection-of-people-caught-up-in-conflict-print-en>, <https://syria10years.icrc.org/en/syria-10-home.html>

¹⁴ For example, ICRC UK and Ireland's 'Twitter Takeovers' by country offices, including this one from Yemen: https://twitter.com/ICRC_uk/status/1388105279405969415?s=20

¹⁵ E.g. Trace the Face Southern Africa: <https://familylinks.icrc.org/southernafrica/en/pages/home.aspx>

¹⁶ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/artificial-intelligence-and-machine-learning-armed-conflict-human-centred-approach>

¹⁷ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/digital-trails-could-endanger-people-receiving-humanitarian-aid-icrc-and-privacy>, p. 9

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 102

¹⁹ R. Richardson, J. Schultz, K. Crawford, *Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice*, New York University Law Review, 2019, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3333423#

18. These applications for humanitarian action bring risks: data protection, privacy, human rights, accountability and so forth. Ensuring human involvement in decisions with significant consequences for people's lives and livelihoods is essential.¹⁶ As an ICRC report "The Humanitarian Metadata Problem – Doing No Harm in the Digital Era" highlights, the use of technologies "*can allow for the tracking and profiling of individuals, with great risk to their lives, integrity and dignity.*"¹⁷
19. Studies have demonstrated how using meta data individuals and groups can be singled out "*based on their political opinions or racial characteristics.*"¹⁸ For example, research in the US on predictive policing systems to "forecast" criminal activity to allocate policing resources documents how these systems are built on racially biased, even unlawful practices known also as "dirty policing".¹⁹
20. Therefore, to actively combat racism and act inclusively, AI applications must be designed and used under the principle of "do no harm" in the digital environment, and respect the right to privacy, including as it relates to personal data protection. To reduce the risks of racism in the digital space, preserving human control and judgement will be an essential component for ensuring legal compliance and mitigating ethical concerns raised by applications of AI and machine learning.

Recommendations

21. **The ICRC will continue to challenge itself, alongside its Movement partners, to better institutionalise its response to anti-racism – both within the organisation for the benefit of staff, and in our response to people affected by conflict and violence, who are at the heart of all we do.** We look forward to addressing some of the broader challenges and ambitions around localisation with the Committee as its inquiry progresses.
22. In terms of recommendations for others, **we would encourage the UK, alongside its humanitarian partners, to look closely at ways to combat racism and exclusion in artificial intelligence and machine-learning.** In the Integrated Review, the UK declared itself a force for good in the digital space. The UK could use this opportunity, post-IR, to create and embed a human-centred approach to the use of AI and machine learning systems. Together with humanitarian organisations like the ICRC, it could set ethical standards to preserve human control and judgement in applications of AI and machine learning for tasks and in decisions that may have serious consequences for people's lives.