



**International Rescue Committee response to  
International Development Committee's inquiry into:  
'The philosophy and culture of aid: racism in the aid  
sector'.**

**May 2021**

1. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) welcomes the decision of the International Development Committee to hold an inquiry into racism in the aid sector.
2. The International Rescue Committee responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster, including the climate crisis, to survive, recover and gain control of their future. In more than 40 countries, our dedicated teams provide clean water, shelter, health care, education, protection and empowerment support to refugees and displaced people.
3. This inquiry refers to 'the aid sector'. IRC's understanding of what comprises 'the aid sector' is that it is the international system which funds and delivers aid, including but not limited to: international organisations; institutional donors including governments but also other kinds of major donors; and the actors, including NGOs and companies, which deliver aid through service provision and other means.
4. To develop this submission, the authors have drawn and expanded on various IRC policies and strategies on diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI). They have also consulted with IRC's staff-led BAME Network.

### Structure of the aid sector

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

5. Within the aid sector, there is a significant power imbalance between organisations headquartered in the global north, and the communities and partners in the global south who these organisations work with.
6. The concentration of resources and decision making in the global north marginalises and excludes the expertise of national and local actors. This is a matter of justice – it is vital that those we work with are empowered. It also undermines programme impact and sustainable outcomes for crisis affected populations.
7. Actors in the global south are not engaged consistently and equitably in decisions about the type of assistance that is provided by the wider aid sector organisation or how services are designed and delivered. This means that those who access assistance can be disempowered and left without a say in what kind of assistance they require or how they want to access it. It also means that the capacity of local delivery partners, who have deep contextual knowledge, is overlooked. Therefore, programmes may not be as impactful as they could otherwise be and may not effectively serve the needs of the communities they seek to support.
8. Civil society organisations with social and communal ties to the places where we work are uniquely capable and well-placed to be catalytic agents of change to achieve sustainable outcomes. The aid sector should seek to increase these actors' influence over decision-making that affects them and their communities. This means growing their control over resources, as well as evolving programme models to increase their choice and agency.
9. Building fair and equitable aid partnerships is predicated on organisations in the global south increasing their control over resources by increasing funds that flow to them, and the level of autonomy over how these funds are used.
10. Actively shifting power to where it rightfully belongs – the communities we serve including front line staff and partner organisations - not only aligns with our values as a sector but also makes for more effective programming. It advances our goal of achieving positive and lasting impact

for people affected by crisis. It: (a) gives power to people who know their own environment and have the right to participate in decisions that affect them, (b) drives scale and sustainable change, and (c) challenges entrenched power dynamics and meaningfully supports client agency, thereby strengthening our accountability to them. Furthermore, evidence suggests that programme quality, including reach, relevance, impact, and efficiency is advanced by partnering with local actors.

## **Racism in the aid sector**

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

11. Racism is a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities, and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. It can stem into individual racism which refers to an individual's racist assumptions, beliefs or behaviours, and structural racism referring to inequalities rooted in the system-wide operation of a society that excludes substantial numbers of members of groups from significant participation in major social institutions.
12. A discussion on racism in the aid sector is long overdue. The need for such a discussion has been laid bare by events in the past year, such as the fact that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected black and ethnic minorities, the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer and the global call for racial equality and justice that followed, as well as reports of racism and discrimination within our own sector.
13. The broader societal discussion on racism has led to the recognition that racism and structural power imbalances within the aid sector are live issues that have not been sufficiently tackled.
14. The IRC's mission centres on overcoming issues of systemic inequality which prevent people from realising their power and accessing their rights, opportunities, and protections. To truly achieve this mission, we must commit to honest dialogues about the role racism plays within our individual organisations and the wider sector. Without such a discussion, we risk perpetuating and reinforcing racism and other structural inequalities in the UK and internationally through our work.

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

15. Racism creates deep inequality for countless people in the aid sector, including for refugees, asylum seekers and staff.
16. Extensive research has repeatedly made the case that diversity and inclusion leads to better organisational decision-making<sup>1</sup>, increased team performance, innovation, and agility<sup>2</sup> and will enable us to take the best approaches to meet the needs of the people we serve. Conversely, racism in the aid sector reduces the impact of organisations (by limiting the range of

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<sup>1</sup> Juliet Bourke, Bernadette Dillon, The diversity and inclusion revolution: Eight Powerful Myths, 2018 - [https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4209\\_Diversity-and-inclusion-revolution/DI\\_Diversity-and-inclusion-revolution.pdf](https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4209_Diversity-and-inclusion-revolution/DI_Diversity-and-inclusion-revolution.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Juliet Bourke, *Which Two Heads Are Better Than One? How Diverse teams Create Breakthrough Ideas and Make Smarter Decisions* (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2016)

perspectives and breadth of expertise – often excluding vital knowledge from programme design and implementation) and disempowers our staff, the people we serve, and partners, thus reducing their opportunities.

17. In communications work, the aid sector has too often represented the communities we serve in a way that removes the agency of the people we serve and presents them as one-dimensional victims, unable to care for themselves. It is essential to move away from the perpetuation of stories and images that are harmful to the way these communities are perceived by the general public and reinforce racist stereotypes. Research shows that their use undermines public support for aid in the longer term.
18. Global decision making, policy making and standard setting in the aid sector remains concentrated in capital cities in the global north. Consequently, global south actors are underrepresented at decision making and policy fora. Restrictions on travel caused by Covid-19 have elucidated this imbalance and allowed a greater equity in representation in virtual meetings and conferences. This should herald the start of a permanent shift to who is 'in the room' when such decisions are taken.
19. Issues of safeguarding cannot be divorced from racism – the issues are intertwined and share root causes. Safeguarding violations between those delivering aid and those receiving it derives from the profound imbalances of power between the two groups of individuals, further underscored by the aid sector's overwhelmingly white, global north leadership. Black and brown people are the groups most at risk from sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector, with further risks affecting women and girls.

How can aid actors be actively anti-racist?

20. Being anti-racist is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organisational structures, policies, practices, attitudes and personal accountability.
21. The aid sector has insufficiently acknowledged or challenged the legacy of colonialism and racism within our sector. Understanding these root causes and their impact on the people we serve and our staff is an important first step to tackling related problems. Organisations should invest in a process of listening and analysis with staff, partners, and the people we serve to identify and understand the barriers to DEI across different dimensions of organisational structures and culture. This should include attention to HR practices (recruitment/staff development and leadership), programme models (partnerships/funding) and external relations (communications, advocacy and fundraising).
22. Globally at the IRC we have hosted over 110 listening sessions across the organisation with more than 2000 participants, held 90 key informant interviews, and co-ordinated 8 Regional Dialogues where we collected feedback from staff, including frontline workers.
23. In the UK we listen carefully to our staff, including our Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and Pride staff-led networks, trade union representatives, and our disability experts. We have also sought to learn from good practice from other UK employers. Following a process of listening and learning, organisations across the aid sector should build and implement a meaningful plan to tackle racism and advance DEI. They should be transparent in progress against this and be held accountable for it.
24. Aid actors should be truly representative and inclusive, and meaningfully collaborate as equal partners with national and local organisations working with local communities. They should

ensure that external engagement efforts reflect the needs and aspirations of the people we serve.

25. Like other organisations in the aid sector, IRC wants to ensure that our compensation, policies, workplace environment, access to training, and staff's ability to raise concerns are not influenced by staff's actual or perceived backgrounds and identities. Yet we know that we can do more to make all of our colleagues feel valued and welcomed at IRC, including by increasing diversity at the organisation's leadership levels. We have thus committed to establish a multi-year plan with explicit action to overcome these issues.

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

26. The sector should prioritise respecting people and communities as sources of knowledge and decision makers on issues that directly affect their lives. One approach is to ensure a gender transformative and equity lens in every program, hearing directly from affected women and girls about what works best in their communities.
27. Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks should be integrated into existing programme design and delivery tools, processes, and accountability mechanisms to strengthen the direct participation of people in deciding which are the most important needs to address and in defining the outcomes that they seek in their lives, rather than making those decisions on their behalf.
28. Implementing robust and accountable feedback mechanisms is one way to integrate anti-racism principles into programme design and delivery; for example, in addition to the use of 'reactive' feedback mechanisms (such as hotlines and suggestions boxes), implementing agencies should systematically consult people to understand their views and opinions through proactive consultation and collaboration.
29. In our new global organisational strategy, the IRC has prioritised our ambition to give the people we serve greater influence over programme design and delivery. We know that our focus on outcomes and evidence in programming goes furthest when we intensively engage the people we serve, especially women and girls, so they can shape, judge, and improve the services we deliver. It is also an opportunity for the people we serve to have more agency over decisions that affect the services they receive. We aspire to engage the people we serve (and others in their communities) meaningfully every time we make a significant decision about the type of programming we do.
30. We are also committed to improving the process for collecting and using community input for the design and delivery of every programme. Over the last five years we have tested different ways of engaging the people we serve. We have committed to standardise our approaches, ensuring every programme systematically engages client views. This data will be synthesised into the sector's first annual global client survey, which will be used to evaluate the performance of our programmes, promote greater transparency, and advocate for client needs.

### **Diversity and inclusion**

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

31. Aid organisations' front-line staff and the people we serve are largely representative of the countries in which they work. However, diversity diminishes as seniority increases. In particular, despite making up the majority of the people we serve and front-line staff, women of colour and women from the global south are particularly under-represented at leadership positions.
32. The IRC has set targets to ensure our leadership becomes more representative, so that we are truly hiring the most effective top talent to deliver on our mission.

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

33. BOND, the umbrella group for INGOs, is leading various sector-wide approaches to promoting diversity and inclusion. In particular, they have acted as a facilitator of discussions and learnings between NGOs, at all levels, and have highlighted best practice.
34. The IRC has a new global DEI strategy based on driving change across three pillars: 1. organisational structure, staffing and HR practices, 2. programming and 3. communication, advocacy and fundraising.
35. Our UK plan covers the protected characteristics in the Equality Act and also those with refugee or asylum status. In it, we made – and are now well underway with implementing – a series of commitments across 15 themes including HR, fundraising and communications. This has already impacted on the way we present the people we serve in our external communications and in helping us to attract a more diverse field of candidates for jobs.
36. While we have been discussing DEI issues for over a decade, we have been galvanised to explicitly commit to wide ranging actions to ensure we re-emphasise our commitment to zero tolerance to racism and all forms of discrimination. We are now on the path to implementing new commitments but recognise that ensuring sustainable change happens is what counts.

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

37. Organisations must ensure their programme design and delivery approach maximises power for the communities we serve through effective collaboration with communities we work with, partners, and staff. We must strive for equal outcomes for diverse populations by using our deep understanding of local power imbalances to ensure equitable access to services. For example, the IRC is piloting different participatory approaches to programme design and client feedback, which will support our aim to stop replicating top-down decision-making in programmes while promoting the complementarity of technical expertise and contextual understanding.
38. Where possible and appropriate, organisations should consistently collect data to understand the diversity of their staff. Baroness McGregor-Smith's review of 'Race at Work'<sup>3</sup> in 2017 highlighted gathering data as one of the key recommendations for employers in order to establish a baseline and measure progress, particularly the importance of employers collecting, and publishing, ethnicity pay gap reporting.

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<sup>3</sup> Baroness McGregor-Smith, *Race in the workplace: The McGregor-Smith Review*, 2017.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/race-in-the-workplace-the-mcgregor-smith-review>

39. Organisations should ensure their external relations (fundraising, communications and advocacy) elevates the voices of country staff and the people they serve in speaking to lived experiences, the reality on the ground, and to policy solutions.

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

40. Financial accountability is built into the funding donors provide. Donors should set expectations of all recipients of their funding – including multilaterals - on diversity and inclusion. For example, they could be to demonstrate how they are making their programmes, organisations and external relations more diverse, equitable and inclusive.
41. FCDO can support efforts to create fair and equitable partnerships by negotiating a more realistic balance between risk-sharing and compliance and by ensuring more adequate and meaningful representation of local actors in relevant decision-making fora. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s guidelines on localisation<sup>4</sup> provide a useful footprint for engaging local actors in decision-making. They should become the norm across the aid sector.
42. FCDO should call for UN pooled funding mechanisms, such as the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) and the new Regionally Hosted Pooled Funds to be scaled up as an efficient alternative to cascading funding from individual UN agencies to frontline implementers. CERF should continue to be accessible to NGOs and local actors in future crises.
43. FCDO should use the opportunity of the Grand Bargain 2.0 to hold a more honest dialogue about the challenges faced by frontline responders – both local and international – face. Short-term funding, limited visibility on grant renewals, extraordinary compliance and risk reduction demands stand in the way of meaningful partnerships with local actors. Donors and UN agencies need to recognise the inherent tension between expecting more ‘localisation’ and demanding more compliance at the same time.
44. Finally, this should not only be about the organisations that the FCDO funds but also the listening, learning and changes that FCDO itself needs to make.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-standing-committee/iasc-interim-guidance-localisation-and-covid-19-response>