

Oxfam submission for IDC inquiry on Racism in the aid sector

Oxfam GB welcomes this inquiry. Throughout this submission, when referring to the aid sector and international aid organisations, we include ourselves in these analyses and critique, and recognise we have a significant role to play in the improvement of the sector.

In recent years, Oxfam GB has placed a greater emphasis on being actively anti-racist¹. This submission provides some of the context that has informed these changes, as well as some commitments Oxfam has made to try and address these issues. We are currently working on dual processes to discuss and challenge racism in our work - an external process focused on our programming, campaigning, fundraising and engagement practices - and another process on our internal culture. We recognise that this work is not yet complete.

Structure of the aid sector

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

1. The international aid structure started with European colonialism in the 19th century. In colonial Britain, Acts of Parliament were introduced to aid and develop agriculture and industry in the colonies, with the ultimate aim of promoting commerce, industry and wealth extraction for the United Kingdom.² 19th century religious missionaries and voluntary organisations also provided support for education and health service provisions, in order to proselytise colonised communities.
2. The reach and capacity of northern based NGOs as service delivery providers grew in the late 20th century as poverty levels rose with the introduction of the structural adjustment programmes and political reforms, which left gaps in services. Governments in wealthier countries increased their funding to NGOs in their countries in order to support service provision domestically and globally.
3. There have been numerous other practices and processes that have reinforced the power imbalance of aid over the decades. Tied aid (aid given in the form of a loans or grants with conditions that procurement of goods or services is limited to the donor country), and in-kind aid (aid in the form of goods and services rather than money) are examples of approaches that have the interests of donors at their core therefore entrenching existing power structures.³ The over-politicisation of aid, where aid is used for tactical purposes by donor countries, also contributes to this notion.⁴
4. Understanding the historical processes that have led countries to “underdevelopment” and the way poverty is racialised, also inform us on why the global north dominates the sector. The transatlantic slave trade, imperialism, and colonialism have resulted in decades of ‘northern’ dominance, and the exploitation of nations. Wealth extraction, in the form of capital, natural resources and forced labour, has contributed significantly to the economic development of now ‘developed’, predominantly white populated nations, at the direct expense of other nations underdevelopment, that are majority populated with people of colour. These actions by actors in the global north have contributed to the conditions that require the aid sector to exist.

¹ When we say that Oxfam is committed to being anti-racist, we are saying we are committed to dismantling systemic and structural racism – in our organisation and in our work.

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/20-21/5/enacted>

³ [Food aid or hidden dumping? Separating wheat from chaff](#)

⁴ [The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics - Oxfam Policy & Practice](#)

5. The history of the aid sector is rooted in power imbalances that are entrenched in racism. The structure of the modern-day aid sector reflects this history and must not be dissociated from it, as it poses implications for all of our work and for our ways of working. Understanding and redressing power imbalances are necessary in order to effectively tackle racism in the aid sector and 'decolonise' aid practice. Without radical reform, the aid sector will remain complicit in racial power imbalances. As an international charity focusing on the alleviation of global poverty, spanning almost 80 years, Oxfam recognises that our work has its legacy in the UK's colonial past, and are committed not only to fight against racism, but to being an actively anti-racist organisation.

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

6. The concentration of funding and resources remains balanced in the favour of northern donors and organisations today. This presents a practical and moral challenge as the world will not be fair and safe for everyone until we address the balance of power in it.
7. Shifting power from funders and from organisations like Oxfam, to the people living with poverty is a necessity. 'Power' not only means money but also the power to make decisions, be heard, and influence. Oxfam believe in strengthening the power of local organisations and communities as those who are best placed to understand the local context and drive their own change. To balance power fairly, we must value everyone's skills and knowledge, no matter who they are or where they are from. We must recognise that we are not always the experts, and challenge assumptions that devalue the skills and knowledge of those living in lower-income countries.

Racism in the aid sector

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

8. In order to effectively challenge racism⁵ in the aid sector and beyond, it is vital that this begins with open, honest and challenging discussions about racism. Without effectively calling out the dynamics of racism within the sector we will only reinforce inequalities in society and the sector and will not achieve our missions of poverty alleviation and social justice. Organisations such as Charity So White⁶ have been highly effective in driving forward these discussions within the sector.
9. It is crucial that an intersectional lens is applied to discussions about race. An approach that looks at how race, gender and other identities interact with one another recognises that intersectionalities create unique experiences of both oppression and privilege and works to uphold the rights of all those who have traditionally been excluded or silenced.
10. At Oxfam, we are aware that discrimination is systemic and often goes unchallenged, including within Oxfam. Discussions about racism in the sector enable us to continue to reflect, learn, and become the feminist⁷ and anti-racist organisation we aspire to be. This means challenging all inequalities including racism and the unfair treatment of women and

⁵ Racism is the belief that white people are superior, and Black, Indigenous and People of Colour are inferior. It can include or overlap with other forms of discrimination such as those based on ethnicity or religion, like anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. At Oxfam we know that racism is systemic and structural. That means it goes far beyond the prejudices or racist behaviour of an individual; it is present in our societies, culture and psyches – sometimes unconsciously and insidiously, sometimes overtly, and also shapes our institutions, organisations and individuals.

⁶ <https://charitysowhite.org/>

⁷ Feminism is the belief that women and men are equal and should have equal rights. It does not privilege women over men, as is sometimes said.

recognising how these can interact with other kinds of discrimination based on sexuality, gender identity, religion, physical ability, ethnicity and caste.

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

11. The practical implications of racism in the aid sector are far reaching. From funding decisions to recruitment practices to the effectiveness of any work that is done. Today, aid resources and power are still based in majority white, high-income countries, whilst programmatic work is based in countries with majority-racialised populations. The Boards and senior leadership of NGOs, IFIs and aid-responsible ministers in governments are also largely white and not representative of, or accountable to, the people resources go to support. While strategic roles remain dominated by white people, people of colour are kept in lower-grade posts, and communities are often only engaged in certain processes, at the behest of donors. This is as a direct result of racism in the sector and is not beneficial for the communities' aid supports, as the lived-experience, knowledge and understanding of communities is not fully represented in decision-making positions.

How can aid actors be actively anti-racist?

12. In order for aid actors to be actively anti-racist, anti-racism work must be prioritised across organisations, resources must be invested in embedding anti-racism efforts across organisations and the sector, and it must be a long-term commitment. Being anti-racist requires aid actors to dismantle structures that institutionalise white privilege and to call out racist culture and practices.⁸
13. Decolonising our structures is about recognising and stabilising efforts to countries and regional teams in terms of funding and power, and not about tokenistic roles and funding that continue to loop power and decision making back to the northern based donor countries. There are inevitable challenges that will arise when doing this work, especially when looking to shift funding and decision making, as it is commonly assumed that knowledge and know-how is based in the north, making donors more hesitant to fund programmes or offices where decisions are made within country by local staff. We must be prepared to challenge these racist assumptions throughout this work whilst ensuring it does not inadvertently damage programmatic work that is supporting communities.
14. In recent years, there has been a shift in the aid sector including INGOs and big donors towards the local ownership of aid and localisation of humanitarian response. This was formally recognised and mainstreamed through international agreements like the Grand Bargain⁹ and Charter for Change¹⁰, both committing the biggest international donors and aid organisations to transfer resources and power directly to the hands of local communities and local partners to enable them to lead on humanitarian responses with minimum control from INGOs and donor. Oxfam has signed and committed to both agreements and is now involved in planning and defining the next stage of the Grand Bargain (2.0). These agreements and the sector-wide shift towards localisation and ownership of aid imply an increasing and intentional effort by donors to ensure that those being supported by aid - communities, organisations, institutions and governments – lead on efforts to design, implement and oversee programmes, operations and expenditure. Local ownership and

⁸ Oxfam defines white privilege as the inherent advantages enjoyed by white people based on their race. White privilege does not imply that white people cannot experience oppression, but that the nature of systemic racism means that this injustice is not based on race.

⁹ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

¹⁰ <https://charter4change.org/>

leadership ensure aid is effective in supporting developmental progress by entrusting and handing power to communities to lead on development efforts and contributes to wider processes of citizen accountability. The localisation agenda when implemented effectively and transparently, is essential in resisting the colonial and racist mechanisms and impact of the traditional and outdated aid system which local communities have constantly challenged and proved to be flawed and not fit for purpose. However, it has been argued by Degan Ali, Executive Director of Adeso, that the localisation agenda is being blocked and misconstrued by racism that operates in the humanitarian sector.¹¹ In order to effectively challenge the concentration of power in the global north, aid actors must live up to the localisation rhetoric and commitments.

15. There should also not be an absence of race in our safeguarding work and in our understanding of what it means to be safe. Routine sexual abuse and violence was a pervasive hallmark of slavery and colonialism - a direct expression of racialised and economic power dynamics, of control, and of domination over the Black female body. The institutionalisation of sexual violence survives long after the abolition of slavery, presenting in all contexts across the world, including the aid sector. How racism perpetuates today shows that we cannot overlook this history in discussions of what it means to be safe as a sector and organisation today. It is therefore important to recognise how the sector's approach to safeguarding might reinforce racialised hierarchies. For these reasons, we know that we cannot overlook the prominence of race as an expression of power in grounding what it means to be safe.
16. Doing anti-racism work effectively must be underpinned by listening and being guided by communities in countries which we work in, and our non-white staff working in our organisations, as well as engaging with racial justice organisations across the world, who have been involved in this work long before the aid sector started looking introspectively. As part of this, it is important to recognise the chronic underfunding and subsequent destabilisation of Black-led and anti-racist organisations, which presents a huge and imminent concern. Research by Ubele Initiative last year notes the impact of Covid-19 on such organisations at the beginning of the pandemic, it was estimated that up to 90% of 137 Black and ethnic minority led organisations were at risk of permanent closure.¹² The sustainability of longstanding, grassroots organisations dedicated to racial equality in the UK and beyond is key for the aid sector to consider if it is serious about its approach to partnerships and anti-racism.
17. Oxfam is a global confederation working in around 90 countries around the world. Our new confederation-wide strategy commits us to shifting to become a more diverse network working together as equals, deeply rooted in local contexts, and to increase resources and power in the global South.¹³
18. At Oxfam GB, we have put a commitment to becoming an anti-racist organisation at the heart of our future¹⁴ and are working on two processes to discuss and challenge racism in our work – an external process focused on our programming, campaigning, fundraising and engagement practices, and another parallel process on our internal culture. As part of this,

¹¹ [Q&A: Degan Ali on the systemic racism impacting humanitarian responses | Devex](#)

¹² [9 out of 10 BAME micro and small organisations set to close if the crisis continues beyond 3 months following the lockdown — UBELE](#)

¹³ [Oxfam Global Strategic Framework 2020-2023](#)

¹⁴ [Oxfam GB Strategy 2020](#)

we have appointed a racial justice lead, who is responsible for leading the development of a racial justice framework, which will include accountability mechanisms to ensure people of colour within Oxfam and the southern women's rights, anti-racism and youth movements the charity works with can measure our progress.

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

19. How we use language to categorise people and the world around us is central to discussions around racism and power in the aid sector. For decades, the international development sector has contributed to a narrative of black and brown people as being poor, helpless and in need of saving, through language and images. These oversimplified and offensive depictions of countries perpetuate racist stereotypes and social hierarchies, and strips people of their dignity. No White Saviours have been leaders in challenging the aid sector and beyond on the racist language and imagery used and how this perpetuates unequal systems of power.¹⁵
20. Whilst terms such as “developed” and “underdeveloped” are beginning to be recognised as problematic, the terms that are prevailing, such as “Global North” and “Global South” are also loaded terms, which present two dichotomous groups, an “us vs them”, and embeds racist notions that knowledge sits in the north and is something to which the ‘south’ aspires. Reframing our language and presenting a nuanced picture that better aligns with the complexities of local contexts and the world around us can help dismantle those toxic, false narratives.¹⁶

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

21. The aid sector does not operate independently or in a vacuum from wider society. The sector and actors within it are a function and a result of the societies in which they operate, and therefore reflect structures, problems, and inequalities that exist within wider society. The first step the UK Government should take to tackle racism in the aid sector, is acknowledge and recognise that institutional racism exists and is a problem in British society, as well as in the development sector. The Runnymede Trust recently coordinated an open letter to the government including actions to ensure anti-racism is reflected and acted upon in the UK.^{17 18}

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

22. Tackling racism within the aid sector and wider society will make aid more effective and fit for purpose. In undertaking anti-racism work, it is important to consider why we undertake this work and what the purpose of decolonising aid is, which ultimately is to restore countries to full independence. Undertaking anti-racism work should not be about strengthening relationships for aid delivery organisations, although this is undoubtedly a positive interim outcome that will occur if this work is done effectively and sensitively.

Diversity and inclusion

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

¹⁵ [No White Saviors If you're not uncomfortable, you're not listening](#)

¹⁶ [Decolonising development narratives | Oxfam Views & Voices](#)

¹⁷ [Boris Johnson urged to reject 'disingenuous' UK race disparities report | The Guardian](#)

¹⁸ [Boris Johnson Urged By 21,000 To Reject 'Whitewashed' Race Report | HuffPost UK](#)

23. Across the UK charitable sector, diversity across different characteristics remains low, particularly in senior positions. People of colour make up only 9% of the charitable workforce compared to 14% of the population of the UK.¹⁹ However, many of these charities are based in London, where communities of people of colour make up closer to 40% of the population.²⁰
24. Research by Third Sector shows that of the 50 largest fundraising charities of 2020, 16% of chief executives, of which one is a black woman, and 10% of other senior leaders were from Black, Asian or ethnic minority backgrounds.²¹ The same research recognised Oxfam as one of three of charities to have both a senior management team and board made up of at least 50% women and 14% people from a Black or ethnic minority background.
25. Although strides have been made in recent years to improve diversity in the sector, progress remains slow. A lack of diversity in the international development sector is particularly important given the need for our workforce to reflect the communities we support, and our mission to tackle inequality.

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

26. At Oxfam, we are committed to equity, diversity, and inclusiveness because we believe these core attributes align with our values and drive our mission. We are committed to promote inclusion across race, gender, age, background, religion, sexual identity, disability, and experience that will drive us towards fighting injustice in the world. Internally the value of inclusivity is central to how we accept, respect and value people with diverse identities and backgrounds. Oxfam is working towards best practice in diversity and inclusion and recognise that achieving change will take time as we consciously deconstruct and dismantle power and privilege within our organisation.²²

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

27. Whilst the promotion of diverse and inclusive organisations is crucial for international aid organisations and there is still much to be done in this area, it is also vital to go beyond just diversity and inclusion towards addressing structural barriers to equality. There can be a tendency for diversity and inclusion to overly rely on tokenistic compliance activities, such as basic trainings on bias and recruitment; an over investment in capacity building of underrepresented groups; or including diverse voices in spaces without giving them any of the power and influence needed to make a change and have the necessary impact. For long term systemic change, organisations should look to addresses real barriers to inclusion that may not be so obvious.
28. At Oxfam, our vision is one where equality is rooted in systemic change, and where everyone is able to contribute to making Oxfam a more equal, just, and inclusive place. Our vision rests on developing a shared cross-organisational commitment to an Oxfam that has shifted from an old culture of certainty and status to an organisation that lives our values, has principles of intersectional justice at the heart of all its work, and demonstrates feminist leadership behaviours at all levels.

¹⁹ <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/>

²⁰ [Diversity stud: Has the picture changed? | Third Sector](#)

²¹ [Diversity stud: Has the picture changed? | Third Sector](#)

²² [Oxfam Gender Pay Gap Report](#)

Further reading

- [Pop Works Africa](#)
- [How to be Anti-Racist in Aid by Aid Re-imagined](#)
- [Opinion: International development has a race problem | Devex](#)
- [Opinion: The hustle — white saviors and hashtag activism | Devex](#)
- [Saranel Benjamin: "We can't just say we're 'doing decolonisation' and think we've done a good job" | Third Sector](#)
- [Big charities 'mimicking some of the worst practices' of corporates, says Oxfam CEO | Civil Society](#)