

International Development Committee's Inquiry into the Philosophy and Culture of Aid.

20 June 2021

Origins of leadership in sector

Aid organisations have their roots in the missionary movement which travelled alongside Britain's slavery and colonialism centuries ago. The racist ontology of Britain's empire and zeal to spread mission has shaped the international development sector and aid organisations operating within it, but has never been open to discussion. Just 30 years ago, the leadership of the sector was wholly White and it was well-known that it was people who came from privilege that ran the sector. There was a sense that the sector was set up to 'do good' and therefore above scrutiny. This morally-purposed mission was characterised by male and female leaders who were there to create a betterment of lives they knew little about but which largely did not matter because of the assumption that those lives were immeasurably made better when a Western-devised programme touched their lives. Charity was 'positive and valuable'. This was the sentiment that underpinned the sector 20 years ago. However, even today, many leaders heading up Aid organisations display the same overall ideologically assuredness that missionaries once did centuries ago. Although many leaders do have a genuine appetite for social justice, they rarely possess the intellectual prowess or curiosity that would advance genuine social justice. Instead, they rest on the premise that a strong sense of morality and well-intentioned fundraising for poverty equates to a well-run organisation.

Diversity as inclusion and participation in a flawed system

Over the years, the diversity of the sector popped up in minimal spaces, perhaps an Asian or Black trustee or a head of finance role to someone not White. However, the mainstay of Director-ship and management remains exclusive because of the unwritten rule that essentially 'you recruit those similar to you'. This was justified in various ways. For example, qualifications not needed for a role but similar to the qualifications that directors may have has led to 'like promoting like'. Writing and analysis skills are presented as aspirational skills for any person of colour with the assumption that there was a Western-owned template for writing. This meant that people from diverse backgrounds coming to the sector could not express themselves naturally or be disruptive to existing modalities even if they were out of date. A sector that should be about transformational change and an end to poverty was and is deeply embedded in a culture of inertia. It is perhaps why the sector has latched on to evaluative mechanisms to tell stories rather than own-person accounts where language could be more authentically expressed.

Problems with current leadership

Leadership has diversified in recent years. However, this has brought with it many unresolved issues of colonial domination. Whilst there are now many Black and Brown leaders, the Aid sector has become a career destination for many people bought into a neoliberal model of change – namely the provision of market-led access for people living in poverty. This is at odds with solidarity and transformational change that clearly sees the problem that 'the system' was built to thrive on inequality and racial demarcation rather than solve poverty that enables the continuation of the concentration of power.

Many leaders hold *faith values* in a nexus alongside organisational ethos values. So if a manager or director has allegations of racism, most Aid organisations will have an implicit protection around such a leader in order to maintain that White, Christian, British, Oxbridge skill sets prevail and also because of the justification that someone of faith cannot have behaved in an improper way. The full extent of just how many White managers have had grievances taken out against them, with a racial bias element which have been expertly dismissed by the collusion of HR is important to recognise. Such cases, often termed as 'relationship breakdowns' or 'poor management' are never reported upwards to the Boards of Trustees. So many claims of racism have been never been properly investigated, using this broad-brush response.

Black and Brown leaders often perpetuate racism as they do not want to confront it without evidence even if they know it exists and experience it themselves too. What this means is that there is encouragement for such colleagues to use deeply dysfunctional HR processes to log cases whilst knowing the HR processes upholds racism and protects White management wholly and determinedly. This is the culture of Aid today: to put it on the individual to fight for their case and create evidence so that leadership can come in and offer strategic overhauls but not until the case has been proved using archaic HR processes that do not recognise or understand structural racism.

The use of capacity building as a form of colonial soft power

Much of the international development sector's work in relation to programming concerns capacity building. In this area, leaders of the sector have focused upon the drive to develop a mandated managerial efficiency over that of the local partners in international programmes and it is conducted without a meaningful approach to partnership. Underpinning this, there will often be desire to establish prerequisite international standards or approaches which may be at odds with the priorities of local organisations and as such can be seen as reinforcing cultural dominance and colonial approaches. Leaders with the precious responsibility of bringing about transformational outcomes for Global South majority people should be interrogating and acknowledging the colonial underpinnings of such "capacity building".

Instead, capacity building is being used as a way to exert soft power by Aid organisations. It is important to recognise the damaging impact that the narrative that local actors lack capacity has on truly decolonising and making the international development sector anti-racist.