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RACISM IN THE AID SECTOR

On 14 June 2022, a report was released in the United Kingdom that seems to have gone somewhat unnoticed, even though the subject it deals with is of major importance to us as development actors who constantly seek to improve ourselves. [Racism in the Aid Sector](#) is the result of an inquiry commissioned by British parliamentarians in February 2021. It follows two earlier investigations into the philosophy and culture of aid, and sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector. The latest of these had highlighted the power imbalances that exist and the vulnerabilities that these cause within the communities where aid programmes are implemented.

Based on this analysis of the harmful attitudes among those designing, managing and delivering aid programmes and projects, British members of parliament (MPs) decided to further dig into how the sector, and relationships within it, can be improved. They asked if there were other weaknesses within the sector and, if so, how they can be overcome. The Development Committee of the House of Commons launched a call for written evidence and began taking oral evidence from witnesses both in the UK and in countries in receipt of UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) to find out what the key issues were. Time and time again, they heard that there was a need to shift decision-making power and resources, which are typically wielded by aid donors such as the UK Government and large international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), towards the countries and communities where programmes are delivered. They were told that aid institutions need to face up to racist and paternalistic attitudes, as well as addressing challenges with diversity, equity and inclusion in staffing. Therefore, they decided a first sub-inquiry would scrutinise structural and institutional racism in the aid sector

This article presents the main findings of this inquiry, and gives some suggestions for how the Global Fund, as an international aid institution, could look at this topic and transparently analyse its culture.

Unbalanced relations of power have key consequences on the funding decisions

The inquiry started by analysing the structure of the aid sector which, it says, is built on a concentration of resources and authority in high-income, 'white' majority countries, primarily in Europe and North America. Programmes are mostly delivered in low- and middle-income countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This means power dynamics are important in examining who makes the key decisions and how prejudices and assumptions based on race have influenced working practices. These key decisions relate to funding decisions (what is funded, who identified the needs, and who made the final decision), but also on how certain expenses are divided (how is the money distributed, who decides to cut funding? How is this decision made and announced?).

Although the terms of reference for this sub-inquiry made no mention of the UK Government's decision to cut the UK's ODA budget, the inquiry took place in this context. Several witnesses' testimonies and written submissions raised concerns about the manner in which funding cuts took place. In many cases, they were decided and implemented by a top-down approach, with very little consultation. This impacted adversely on the partnerships between the UK Government, implementing partners and the communities where they work. It demonstrated a lack of control afforded to the countries where programmes are delivered and an absence of donor accountability to the local community. Several organisations were clearly frustrated by their experiences.

This example shows that power is unbalanced as the cuts are most likely to impact on in-country programme staff, including small national organisations. It transfers the risk to in-country partners due to short-term contracts that do not provide job tenure security for most of those working on the projects. "The sudden cuts to UK ODA funding show how precarious this relationship can be for those on the frontline", concluded the researchers.

Fundraising strategies depict communities as poor and helpless

Charity fundraising appeals depicting the communities they serve as poor and helpless have become a cliché. Although many organisations have moved away from showing white aid workers — instead using images of frontline workers from the local community — the inquiry reports that these films still foster the sense that "the individuals they serve are needy and require saving, thus replicating outdated stereotypes". These narratives can also oversimplify the situation and do not explore the reasons why those communities are living in poverty. Slogans often follow the model that says 'give £X per month and you can achieve Y'. This underplays the other factors that have contributed to that individual being in that situation, such as unequal trading relations, climate change and/or conflict.

Another concern relates to the use of pictures used by communities' aid organizations to generate support and promote their work. For example, the practice for obtaining consent for using these images is often not as routinely implemented as it is in Western countries. Interviewees raised concerns that even where consent forms have been signed, those depicted may not have been fully informed about how the images would be used. Often, images are recycled and used with stories which are entirely unconnected to the original purpose or location. Guidelines on informed consent for obtaining and using images are not observed as thoroughly for individuals from the communities that aid organisations work with as they are in the Western countries.

"The dictionary of racism in the aid sector"

A fascinating chapter in this inquiry relates to the standards used to judge everything. According to the report, "racism manifests [in the global aid sector] in decisions around whose expertise we value. Evidence to our inquiry suggested that institutions in high income countries like the UK assume they have

the knowledge and best practice to assist people in low and middle-income countries". Due to a belief that these institutions represent the 'gold standard', local partners are often required to adapt to the outsiders' way of working.

"Racist attitudes also play out in the narrative that local organisations are 'high risk' and need 'capacity building'. The use of European languages, particularly English, in the development sector can lock out national actors who operate in local languages". And the MPs call on donors (in particular the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office/FCDO) to consider whether applications for funding should always be submitted in English – especially in bids for small projects to be undertaken by local civil society organizations, administered by embassies.

Some respondents stated that much of the terminology commonly used in the aid sector disempowers the communities that aid organisations work with. According to them, "it is the manifestation of colonial attitudes in today's language and can reinforce harmful and demeaning stereotypes. It has led to a 'white saviour' narrative, where knowledge and resources are seen to be transferred to passive 'recipients' or 'beneficiaries'. This undermines the possibility of equitable partnerships and strips individuals of their identity and agency. Themrise Khan, an independent development professional from Pakistan, strongly rejected the narrative that communities in low- and middle-income countries are poor and need to be saved. Informants also explored the idea that in countries like the UK there is an ideal of Western civilisation that others need to aspire to. Natalie Lartey from the International Institute for Environment and Development argued that the narratives around the need for modernisation and the 'need to save' people can only exist while we are silent on the broader root causes of extreme poverty, which have their roots in racism, in colonialism, in poor terms of trade, and in conflict. MPs strongly condemn the terminology used in the aid sector that has, according to them, its roots in colonialism; it makes the communities into 'others' where programmes are delivered and reinforces ideas that 'the West' is the ideal that others should aspire to. It is not easy to strip the sector of terms such as 'recipient' or 'beneficiary': even the term 'aid' adds to this narrative.

Can we open the Pandora's box of racism with international donors?

Discussions about making the sector more equitable and respectful of those it is intended to serve are by no means new. The report tells the story of Degan Ali, Executive Director of Nairobi-based NGO, Adeso, who said that the fact that she had previously spoken out about her experiences of racism in the aid sector had not been well received. As a result of her honesty, her organisation was blacklisted by many of the donors in her home country, Somalia. During the interview, she explained that "people want to believe that aid workers are good people, who have sacrificed a nice life in their home country, so how can they be participating in a system that is racist?"

Since the killing of George Floyd brought questions of racial injustice to the fore, and the COVID-19 pandemic required INGOs to withdraw staff from the frontlines of programme delivery, several organisations have created more space for difficult conversations about their position in the global system and the impact of their internal working practices, but we are yet to see what the long-term impact will be.

Can we shift the power?

The report highlights powerful assertions that aid actors in the UK need to work more equitably with partners in the countries where they operate. To advocate for this shift of power, MPs wrote to the Foreign Secretary in January 2022, ahead of the UK's new International Development Strategy. They strongly criticised the way decisions around aid spending are still often made in the headquarters of European and North American donors and INGOs. They are detached from the communities that organisations serve geographically, politically and culturally which can lead to programmes being less effective. Justifications for this are often couched in beliefs that NGOs from these high-income countries are less likely to

mismmanage financial resources.

However, the report highlights the fact that “if the funds are transferred directly from the donor to the local civil society organisation, to the recipient, then there is a very short, auditable trail. The more transfers involved in a resource-flow, the more opportunities there are for money to go astray and to be lost in overheads and transaction costs”. And they conclude “therefore, it is not beneficial to have international NGOs acting as intermediaries between donors and local organisations. Donors such as the FCDO need to be at the forefront of efforts to shift the power and provide funding directly to locally-led organisations. Donors’ compliance requirements and complex applications for funding can be some of the biggest barriers to locally led development”.

Conclusion

The reports concludes that since the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in 2020, many aid organisations have had to quickly shift their operating models, relying more heavily on local actors who could maintain access to local populations. “This gave impetus to conversations about locally led development, but it is too early to see if it has led to a long-term shift in decision making power or increased direct funding to local actors. One of the principles of locally led development is that it should work towards a scenario where the country is no longer reliant on outside aid. The aid community should ensure that country programmes clearly outline a responsible and locally led exit strategy”.

In this year of Global Fund replenishment, during which the Global Fund must mobilize donors but also calculate allocations and define the tools for preparing future funding requests, this report can only ring true to our ears. The Global Fund is one of the few donors to have chosen from the outset to rely on country actors through the CCM, and with a view to complementarity (the Global Fund covers gaps related to country strategies). Its focus on partnership, the foundation of its action, allows communities to be part of all decision-making bodies not only in Geneva but also in the countries.

However, we have to admit that some of the issues raised in this report are uncomfortably close to home for the way the Global Fund operates, and that the Global Fund, committed to transparency and continuous improvement, should take note of them.

First, there is the issue of country ownership and ‘taking back control’. Despite national dialogue, many countries’ interests are not always aligned with those of the Global Fund and they would like to have a greater say in what the grants are spent on. However, Aidsplan has been told that countries fear retaliation if they question certain issues. The Global Fund Country Teams have become even more powerful with the new funding model and increasingly stringent risk management procedures and play a much more direct role in funding request development than five years ago.

Finally, voices have been raised against the increasingly cumbersome and incomprehensible procedures for country actors; the cuts made in Geneva at the time of grant-making have led some to say that no one recognizes the final product. The communities are certainly represented on the CCM and in Geneva, but questions of legitimacy and representativeness are regularly raised. And more generally, the attitude that decisions about implementation arrangements in fragile countries are made in Geneva, along with all the risk management, punitive measures and distrust of country actors, are issues that can no longer be ignored.

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