

**The Gender and Development Network**

**Written submission to the International Development Committee on the  
philosophy and culture of aid: racism in the aid sector**

30 April 2021

**Introduction**

This submission is written by the Gender and Development Network (GADN). GADN is a network of leading UK-based non-governmental organisations, academics and experts working on gender, development and women's rights issues.

GADN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry on racism in the aid sector. The global Black Lives Matter movement has firmly placed the issue of racial injustice on the global agenda, and so it is important for the UK aid sector to reflect on and understand its role within the wider calls for racial justice.

This submission focuses on two particular areas in its response to the philosophy and culture of aid. First, it examines the structure of the aid sector and the historical processes that have led countries and organisations from the Global North to dominate the international aid sector as well as the practical implications of this concentration of funding and resources in the Global North. Second, the submission considers the issue of racism in the aid sector, looking in particular at the ways in which it manifests. The paper explores some of the ways in which to address these challenges, including recommendations for the UK Government.

It is important to stress that the analysis in this submission should not be used to justify cuts to aid by the UK Government. The solution must be to address unequal power relations, not remove resources while preserving an unequal system. We recognise

too that individuals, and even organisations, within the aid ecosystem are frequently well meaning but work within a system that is highly problematic.

### **Structure of the aid sector**

The UK aid sector is an enduring legacy of colonisation; a system which, for over 300 years, enabled the forceful expansion of Europe's power, influence and domination across all parts of the world. Aid is an extension of this very system which has seen the redeployment of colonial-era officers as 'technical development' officers.<sup>1</sup> These re-deployed officers in turn have gone on to shape the multilateral system in senior posts at the main Bretton Woods institutions including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and across UN agencies,<sup>2</sup> thereby reproducing the colonial logics that placed Western notions of both 'civilisation' and 'whiteness' at the heart of our current global systems.

In his inaugural address in 1949, US President Harry Truman declared a commitment to 'the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the language of development became intimately tied to ideas of progress and the primacy of the West as 'civilised' against a 'backward' under-developed world. Without any reflection on how and why the world came to be divided in this way, Development demanded the 'under-developed' to become 'developed like us'. This framing of Development meant that colonisers retained the power to define what it was, the problems that led to under-development and how to solve those problems.<sup>4</sup> It is a world view that is deeply divided along racialised and gendered lines, underpinned by a patriarchal white supremacy, rooted in European Empire.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, over the last 70 years, development 'knowledge' and 'expertise' has been concentrated in the Global North based on the false premise that this is where solutions to 'under-development' are housed. It has led to the establishment of many Western, world-leading think-tanks and policy institutions that produce knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Hodge, J. 2010. 'British Colonial Expertise, Post-Colonial Careerism and the Early History of International Development'. *Journal of Modern European History*, 8 (1), 24-46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26265902>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Truman, H.S. 1949. 'Inaugural Address of Harry S Truman'. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/truman.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/truman.asp)

<sup>4</sup> Narayanaswamy, L. 2021. 'Decolonising Aid'. Unpublished manuscript

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

about how to address the many challenges facing countries in the Global South. Most notably, the World Bank has been highly influential in producing ‘knowledge’ and providing policy advice, research and technical assistance to developing countries on a range of macro-level economic issues. In the early 1990s, it was instrumental in the production of a body of knowledge known as ‘the Washington Consensus’ which has more recently culminated in ‘the Wall Street Consensus’.<sup>6</sup> The dominance of this one knowledge system is one that is firmly rooted in Western neoliberal economic thinking and was the source of widely condemned Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that required developing countries to make deep cuts to public spending as a condition of borrowing money. SAPs have had long-lasting and devastating impacts on the lives of millions of people across the Global South. More recently, this knowledge and expertise is demonstrated in the World Bank’s flagship ‘Doing Business Report’<sup>7</sup> which ranks countries according to how favourable their business environment is – largely for the benefit of investors. Its widely criticised methodology<sup>8</sup> has long influenced how developing countries shape their economies in attempts to meet Western standards of development, despite potentially harmful consequences.

Critically, knowledge from the Global North, has always been framed as neutral and divorced from any epistemic framework that is rooted in its own culture and history. It is important to recognise that this apparent universality is one that has been achieved through the formation of colonial and neo-colonial power relations that exclude and suppress centuries old knowledge systems that do not conform to Western norms.

For decades, the dominance of Western knowledge in international development discourse and practice has had the effect of side-lining the expertise and contributions of local actors who provide invaluable knowledge of their local contexts and the needs of their communities. Additionally, their contributions to national and international policy alternatives – in areas like economics – that counter Western ways of knowing and understanding the world, often fail to be included in the canon of recognised and

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<sup>6</sup> Gabor, D. 2019. ‘From the Washington Consensus to the Wall Street Consensus’. *Developing Economics*, 27 October. <https://developingeconomics.org/2019/10/27/from-the-washington-consensus-to-the-wall-street-consensus/>

<sup>7</sup> World Bank. 2020. *Doing Business Report*. <https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/reports/global-reports/doing-business-2020>

<sup>8</sup> Bretton Woods Project. 2020. ‘As World Bank pauses *Doing Business Report*, pressure mounts for it to be permanently scrapped’. <https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2020/10/as-world-bank-pauses-doing-business-report-pressure-mounts-for-it-to-be-permanently-scrapped/>

respected knowledge. While a single, universal knowledge system does not exist, the aid sector has been instrumental in reproducing colonial forms of knowledge production which has placed limited value, or altogether ignored, the plethora of perspectives and contributions of those from and living in the Global South, especially Black women, Women of Colour and those from minoritised groups. These biases are deeply embedded in the functioning of the aid sector which has long privileged funding to large, 'reputable', organisations registered in the Global North. Oftentimes, the development 'knowledge' produced by such organisations serves to rationalise and legitimise certain viewpoints about the Global South by the donor thereby limiting the scope to fund research and programmes that counter accepted norms and seek to dismantle structural inequalities that bring about transformative social change. Furthermore, the international aid infrastructure is one that favours large, Global North-based organisations that have the human resources to manage and understand the bureaucracies of aid funding. This has had the effect of excluding much smaller, Global South-based organisations from substantial funding opportunities.

As part of its colonial legacy, the aid sector's work has contributed to systematically undermining the role of national governments. Unequal trade and investment relationships have long exploited the resources of countries in the Global South for the benefit of the Global North. This can be seen in the practice of multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, the Bretton Woods Institutions and the G7. Over time, this has had the effect of stripping the capacities of governments in the Global South to adequately respond to the global challenges they face and has created the room for INGOs and private sector actors to fill these capacity gaps. Entire sectors like education and health are increasingly being driven by INGOs and development organisations than by indigenous bodies, so undermining the social contract between governments and their citizens. Entire canons of critical research in such sectors remain the intellectual property of donor agencies as opposed to the respective national Ministries and local people.<sup>9</sup> Scant attention is paid to the way in which these governments have been deliberately weakened, first by colonialism and then by the conditionality of donors around fiscal consolidation targets and SAPs that

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<sup>9</sup> GADN Women of Colour Forum. 2020. 'Collective statement on systemic racism and white supremacy in the UK international aid sector'. <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/gadns-woc-forum-statement-on-systemic-racism-and-white-supremacy>

have deliberately prevented governments in the Global South from building the social infrastructure that INGOs are then brought in to bolster.

A 2019 report by AWID identified some of the harms caused by the current international funding ecosystem<sup>10</sup> which is predominantly located within institutions across the Global North. In particular, the ways in which certain kinds of funding can distort solutions to pressing structural problems by driving resources to service provision and charity without addressing the root causes of inequality. Furthermore, money can also be used to expressly fund issues and actors that undermine feminist social change and aim to preserve a particular understanding of the world that reinforces harmful colonial logics.

The aid sector's response to many of these asymmetries has been to gear its strategies towards 'localisation' efforts which refers to 'aid transferred to national rather than international entities'.<sup>11</sup> The assumption is that decentralising aid to national and/or local actors might be a way for Southern-based actors to re-imagine development ideas in ways that are better suited for their specific contexts.

Efforts to 'localise' represent a recognition that North-South power imbalances need to be redressed. However, 'localisation' must not be seen as a silver bullet to address the concentration of funding and resources in aid organisations within the Global North. There is a danger that 'localisation', does nothing to address the structural concerns about aid itself and so merely leaves colonial logics and power structures largely intact. Crucially, it is Northern donors who still define the agenda and control where, when and how the funds are transferred and what kind of reporting is considered acceptable. It is only when these colonial logics and the harm they have, and continue, to cause are acknowledged that we might then start the process of re-imagining UK approaches to aid.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> AWID. 2019. 'Towards a feminist funding ecosystem: A framework and practical guide'.

<https://www.awid.org/publications/toward-feminist-funding-ecosystem-framework-and-practical-guide>

<sup>11</sup> ODI. 2013. 'Localising aid: sustaining change in the public, private and civil society sectors'.

<https://odi.org/en/publications/localising-aid-sustaining-change-in-the-public-private-and-civil-society-sectors/>

<sup>12</sup> Narayanaswamy, L. 2021. 'Decolonising Aid'. Unpublished manuscript

## Racism in the aid sector

The aid sector, as a microcosm of wider society, is inherently racialised. This is in addition to the sector being borne out of a long and complicated history tied to European imperialism. As a result, race is a central issue within international development discourse and practice and the sector cannot be immune from accusations of racism by virtue of the seemingly benevolent work that it does. This also applies more broadly to government institutions like the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the International Development Committee. The global Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 starkly brought these issues to the fore in the UK aid sector. In response to the murder of George Floyd in the USA and the ensuing global protests, the GADN Women of Colour Forum produced a collective statement addressing concerns about systemic racism and white supremacy in the UK aid sector.<sup>13</sup> The statement outlined the ways in which systemic racism manifests within the sector and concluded with nine specific recommendations on what is required as part of a reimagined aid sector.

The WOC Forum statement identified the pervasiveness of white supremacy culture<sup>14</sup> across many aid organisations and its potential for causing harm to both People of Colour and white people. This includes issues like institutional defensiveness, power hoarding and fear of open conflict that facilitate the creation of a toxic and damaging work culture. The statement also refers to a report by ACEVO<sup>15</sup> which identified that 68 percent of respondents had experienced, witnessed or heard stories about racism in their time in the charity sector. Critically, the statement calls for a reimagined UK aid sector that centres the issue of reparations and acknowledges how global systems of capitalism and colonialism have withheld and restricted power and resources to countries in the Global South. Reparations are one way of responding to these historic challenges caused by centuries of colonisation. In addition to demands for monetary compensation for past and ongoing injustices, reparations movements seek to reshape our global structures to better meet the needs of people in the Global South.

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<sup>13</sup> GADN Women of Colour Forum. 2020. 'Collective statement on systemic racism and white supremacy in the UK international aid sector'. <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/gadns-woc-forum-statement-on-systemic-racism-and-white-supremacy>

<sup>14</sup> Okun, T et. A. 2021. 'The characteristics of white supremacy culture'.

<https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>

<sup>15</sup> ACEVO and Voice4Change England. 2020. 'Home Truths: Undoing racism and delivering real diversity in the charity sector'. <https://www.acevo.org.uk/reports/home-truths/>

Actors within the aid sector, particularly white people with power and influence, have a critical role to play in advocating for and helping to build anti-racist organisations and institutions. Crucially, an anti-racist organisation or institution must first acknowledge the aid sector's deep ties to colonisation and must centre the dismantling of European colonisation as a core part of its work. While diversifying Boards and management structures has been an approach that many organisations and institutions have begun prioritising as part of an ambition to be anti-racist, the greater representation of Black people and People of Colour within inherently Eurocentric organisational structures will not necessarily translate into transformative change. Furthermore, anti-racist organisations and institutions must prioritise their accountability mechanisms towards the most marginalised people whom they seek to serve instead of just their donors.

Building anti-racist organisations and institutions requires long-term funding and commitment to the cause even after global interest and attention on this issue has faded.

## **Recommendations**

In order to address and combat racism and dismantle the colonial legacies which continue to dictate discourse and practice and within the wider aid sector, below are recommendations for the UK Government.

The UK Government must:

1. **Use its presidency of the G7 in 2021 to produce a clear statement of commitment to addressing systemic racism,** domestically and internationally, and agree to review its progress at the next G7 Summit in 2022.
2. **Commit to decolonise relations between the UK and the Global South.** This requires acknowledging the historical legacy of colonialism and recognising as well as redressing embedded and ongoing historical power imbalances in development aid and assistance and international trade and investment rules.

3. **Use its influence on the Board of International Financial Institutions** to stop the practice of imposing damaging conditionalities attached to the provision of ODA and debt relief to developing countries.
4. **Recognise, prioritise and mainstream the knowledge and views of the world constructed outside the frame and experience of whiteness** in its work throughout the FCDO.
5. **Respond to growing global calls for reparations** to account for and reshape the structures that have oppressed and continue to disadvantage billions of Black people and people of colour both domestically and internationally.
6. **Establish an independent Commission to interrogate the true impact of Britain's colonial legacy**, how it continues to manifest - including through the aid sector - and propose recommendations. In the context of Brexit, there is an opportunity for the UK to re-establish relationships with its former colonies on a more equal playing field.

**For more information please contact:**

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