

Racism in the Development and Humanitarian Aid and Advocacy Sector[†]

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The Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 served as a catalyst for debate on not only police reform in the United States but in other fields and sectors, including the development and humanitarian aid and advocacy sector. Often looked upon as a ‘do-good’ sector, raising issues of racism and discrimination entrenched in the sector once seemed incongruous. However, as the Black Lives Matter movement brought to the fore the systemic, structural, and widespread nature of racism, the logical conclusion was that this sector may not be immune to racism. Calls mounted for the sector to tackle the impacts of racism, organizations were openly called out for their racist practices and systems, and a number of testimonies were posted on social network platforms. This article introduces some of the major issues raised in the last two years and points out some quarters of the sector in which it still seems difficult to openly discuss racism.

As the Black Lives Matter movement spread across continents and sectors after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 25 May 2020,¹ we have been seeing moves to challenge racism embedded in the development and humanitarian aid and advocacy sector. Although the sector’s organizations, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs), initially issued statements and articles in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and affirmed their commitment to educating the public about racism, this was soon followed by a cascade of critical comments on racism prevalent in the sector itself.² This article reviews some of the major issues discussed in the last two years and points out those quarters of the sector in which issues of racism are rarely discussed openly.

I RACISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

When the Black Lives Matter movement sought to expose the systemic, structural, and widespread nature of racism, a logical conclusion was that the development and humanitarian aid and advocacy sector may not be immune to racism. While such criticism

[†] This article is partially based on a presentation at ‘Online Symposium: Past, Present and Future of Humanitarian and Development Aid: Rethinking the Aid Sector with Binalakshmi Nepram’ on 4 February 2021. The author worked at Oxfam and was in charge of humanitarian policy and advocacy from 2003 to 2015, has been a consultant to Terra Renaissance, a Japanese NGO, since 2015, and has been involved in international advocacy campaigns and networks on arms control. Some parts are based on the author’s experience. The research conducted to write this article was funded by JSPS KAKENHI, grant numbers 16K17075, 18H03606, 21K13250, 22H00920, and 22H03828.

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¹ Silverstein, ‘The global’.

² Bruce-Raeburn, ‘Opinion’; Pephrah, ‘Opinion’; Slim, ‘Is racism’.

provoked resistance and discomfort in some quarters of this sector, others have claimed that continuing to ignore the presence of racism is no longer an option.³ In fact, there has been a growing call for the sector to tackle the impacts of racism, white supremacy, colonialism, inequality, gender prejudice, and patriarchy, all of which are deeply entrenched in our sector's power structures.⁴

Past research shows that the system favours white people over their peers of colour by placing them in positions of leadership, and those at the decision-making table in aid and advocacy organizations do not reflect the demographic profile of the communities they serve.⁵ For instance, survey results released in 2016 found that in the United Kingdom's aid sector only 3 per cent of its chief executives were people of colour, and black workers with degrees earned on average 23.1 per cent less than white workers.⁶ In another survey, nearly every participant of colour had a story about how the dominant policies, practices, and cultures had marginalized them.⁷ From experiences of overt racial discrimination to micro-aggressions and adverse workplace cultures, the participants described racism they had experienced while working in the development sector.⁸ As asserted by Lena Bheeroo et al., '[t]he shocking irony is that international NGOs purport to promote human rights and equality for all communities around the world, yet our workforces have a systemic racism and inequality problem.'⁹

Following the Black Lives Matter movement, structural racism and racist behaviours and attitudes that were overlooked in the sector have been widely discussed in social media under hashtags such as #DecolonizeDevelopment, #AntiRacistInAid, #RethinkingHumanitarianism, and #AidToo. Aid and advocacy organizations have been called out openly. For instance, over 1,000 current and former members of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) signed a searing open letter, suggesting that the organization was run by a 'privileged white minority' and that it had 'failed people of colour, both staff and patients'.¹⁰ Former and current staff members of other organizations, including Amnesty International,¹¹ Catholic Relief Services,¹² International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC),¹³ Nobel Women's Initiative,¹⁴ and Women Deliver,¹⁵ have also issued statements and testimonies about the widespread and persistent nature of racial discrimination, exclusion, and white supremacy in their organizations and in the sector as a whole.

In aid-recipient countries, local staff members are routinely hired by aid organizations on short-term contracts with limited access to safe, secure working and housing conditions, while those from the donor countries are given safe housing and access to resources.¹⁶ Internal reports of unequal treatment and injustice are ignored or dismissed.¹⁷ Racism, inequality, gender prejudice, and patriarchy in the sector have created an infamous hotbed for sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of people in aid-recipient countries committed by the aid workers who are there to alleviate suffering, not perpetuate it—an issue which has

³ Nwajiaku-Dahou and Leon-Himmelstine, 'How to'.

⁴ For instance, see Balk, 'A time'; The New Humanitarian, 'Readers react'.

⁵ Bheeroo, Billing, Ampomah, Mafethe, and Lally-Francis, 'Time to'.

⁶ Trades Union Congress, 'Black workers'.

⁷ Bheeroo, Billing, Ampomah, Mafethe, and Lally-Francis, 'Time to'.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Foulkes, 'Humanitarians'. For testimonies by former MSF staff members, see Majumdar, 'Bearig'.

¹¹ Parveen, 'Amnesty International'.

¹² Amin, Parker, and Dodds, 'Exclusive'.

¹³ Adelman, 'I've seen'.

¹⁴ Oppenheim, 'Nobel Women's Initiative'.

¹⁵ Adelman, 'I've seen'.

¹⁶ Agaba and Anonymous, 'Opinion'; Secret aid worker, 'Secret'.

¹⁷ Ibid.

been widely reported since February 2018 with the disclosure in *The Times*¹⁸ of a case of sexual abuse and exploitation by Oxfam staff members in Haiti. Often, such misconduct and crimes were covered up; victims and whistleblowers were threatened, while perpetrators went unpunished.

II ‘LOCALIZATION’

In 2016, at the World Humanitarian Summit, donors and UN agencies signed a document comprising 51 decisions to make humanitarian aid more effective.¹⁹ This is called the ‘Grand Bargain,’ which had 63 signatories (25 nations including Japan, 11 UN Agencies, five inter-governmental organizations and Red Cross/Red Crescent movements, and 22 NGOs), representing around 84 per cent of all humanitarian donor contributions in 2019. It commits donors and aid organizations to provide at least 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible by 2020. However, the 2020 Global Humanitarian Report revealed that the overall percentage of funding disbursed directly to local and national responders fell from 3.1 per cent in 2016 to only 2.1 per cent (USD 444 million) in 2019. As the majority of humanitarian funding goes to non-national outside agencies, such as large international NGOs and UN agencies, the ideas and priorities of those organizations tend to be reflected in how projects are developed and implemented.

Ideologies, practices, and research agendas of the powerful have been routinely normalized and legitimized, and the values and norms underpinned by racist and racializing ideas have been promoted as something universal that must be respected.²⁰ There were indeed moments in the past when Western humanitarian aid organizations, such as Oxfam and MSF, questioned Western ideas, such as the core humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. In the 1990s, these principles based on deontological ethics were criticized, especially the neutrality principle, as being potentially harmful and causing undesired consequences.²¹ But the alternative approach—the so-called ‘new humanitarianism’ based on consequentialist ethics—also looks Western-centric.²² Supporters of the new humanitarianism argued that humanitarian aid should be provided in a way that brings about good consequences and withheld when it is unlikely to contribute to them, and they justified taking sides with warring parties and expressing political positions on the humanitarian situations in which they work. However, the question arises as to who decides what consequences are good, who draws the line between deserving and undeserving victims, who decides which warring parties are just, and who decides which political positions should be advocated at UN meetings and other influential fora—those who control and manage the humanitarian aid funding?

In such a sector, whose expertise is valued, whose voices are heard, who holds the levers of power, and who gets a vote? After the Black Lives Matter movement, citizens and aid workers in aid-recipient countries have come forward on Twitter and other platforms with painful experiences of having their ideas, suggestions, and knowledge trivialized or ignored. Their knowledge was often treated as worth less than the view of Europeans

¹⁸ O’Neill, ‘Oxfam in Haiti’.

¹⁹ The grand bargain: a shared commitment to better serve people in need, Istanbul, Turkey, 23 May 2016. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/grand_bargain_final_22_may_final-2_0.pdf (accessed on 15 May 2022).

²⁰ Nwajiaku-Dahou and Leon-Himmelstine, ‘How to’.

²¹ Duffield, ‘Governing’.

²² Ibid.

parachuted in after one month of training. As Naser Haghamed, chief executive officer of Islamic Relief Worldwide, summarized, '[t]here would appear to be a persistent notion that locals in the global South cannot be trusted to carry out the work themselves, and hence the need for white 'ex-pats' to constantly travel overseas.'²³

Local actors' abilities to develop and manage aid projects, to administer funding, and to define good consequences are often doubted, and their political views about the conflict situations they face are seen as carrying the risk of negative consequences, such as politicization and misuse, while staff members of aid organizations living in the global North who have little knowledge of the situation on the ground are expected to make good choices, and aid funds continue to be allocated to their organizations despite their systemic and persistent failure to prevent sexual crimes, misappropriation of funds, fraud, and nepotism by their own staff members.²⁴ After the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, some began to question whether one very deep-seated reason for systemic reluctance to live up to localization rhetoric might be racism.²⁵

III WAYS AHEAD ?

As many have pointed out in the last two years, it had been taboo for a long time to talk about racism in the 'do-good' sector.²⁶ As Corinne Gray, Chief Executive Officer of Uncomfortable Revolution and former UN Refugee Agency staff member, rightly put it:

Experiencing racism, no matter how subtle, is hurtful. And, sometimes, we respond in pain. But so many times, when we address it, the conversation shifts to our tone. Suddenly, we find ourselves apologising for making a colleague uncomfortable by pushing back against a racist comment. Suddenly, we find ourselves in a world where the act of calling out racism is more offensive than racism itself.²⁷

The author of this article has directly witnessed such moments time and again in her 19-year work in the sector. Certainly, before the surge of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, the term racism was rarely pronounced in relation to problems in the sector. As an example, several years ago, numerous NGO staff members in a 'humanitarian disarmament' advocacy NGO coalition pointed out issues abuse of power by its leaders and discrimination against its Southern members. Their emails stated emphatically, 'enough is enough'. As a consequence, they were labelled as problematic, impolite, and money-seeking trouble-makers by those who were accused. When an NGO worker from the global South pointed out problems in the same NGO coalition in a face-to-face meeting using terms such as 'misuse of power', she was immediately silenced by a white woman from the United Kingdom who vehemently admonished her for using such language. In the same year, a conference of states parties to a treaty that the same NGO coalition promotes was held in Geneva, and the theme of the conference was 'gender and gender-based violence'. The NGO coalition launched an annual monitoring report at the conference, which included photos of both men and women, but mostly white men and women, despite its claim to be universal and diverse. In addition, where photos of persons of colour were used in this

²³ Haghamed, 'Opinion'.

²⁴ O'Neill, 'Oxfam'.

²⁵ Slim, 'Is racism'.

²⁶ Gray, 'Doing'.

²⁷ Ibid.

report, most were portrayed as faceless and nameless bodies.

In fact, it still seems difficult in some quarters of the sector to openly discuss issues of racism and white supremacy in their own groups, and the above ‘humanitarian disarmament’ sub-sector may be one such example. There has been relative silence on racism-related matters in the ‘humanitarian disarmament’ sub-sector compared to the wider development and humanitarian aid and advocacy sector, even after the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020. Some of those interviewed by the author pointed out the difficulties that ‘humanitarian disarmament’ actors from the global South experience in speaking openly about racism-related issues in their sub-sector, mainly for fear of causing trouble with donors of the global North, whose advocacy and campaigning funds typically go to groups’ Secretariats mostly situated in the North and led by white staff members.²⁸ Others have noted that the cause of the silence among individuals in the North who are involved in ‘humanitarian disarmament’ might be insecurities in terms of career and relations with influential actors in the relatively small community.²⁹ In such quarters, it may be necessary to focus on creating an atmosphere in which people can more openly discuss racism, white supremacy, colonialism, and inequality embedded in the groups and networks they have organized.

Similarly, the Japanese aid and advocacy sector has been relatively silent on racism-related matters in their own sector. Although the Black Lives Matter movement has been reverberating throughout (albeit unevenly) the development and humanitarian aid and advocacy sector, there has not been much debate on racism-related matters among Japanese practitioners and researchers. Some in the sector may think that racism is a problem of organizations based in the West and that it has little relevance for Japanese practitioners and researchers in the sector. However, it is worth examining whether we are indeed immune to racism.

This article and the Binalakshmi Nepam’s article in this number, as well as Shinya Konaka’s article³⁰ and Go Shimada’s article³¹ in the last number of *The Journal of Research Institute for the History of Global Arms Transfer*, are part of the results of our efforts to openly discuss these underexplored issues through organising online events, such as the ‘Online Symposium: Past, Present and Future of Humanitarian and Development Aid: Rethinking the Aid Sector with Binalakshmi Nepam’ on 4 February 2021, the online seminar ‘Race and Gender in Humanitarian Disarmament with Binalakshmi Nepam’ on 23 July 2021, and the online seminar ‘BLM and the International Aid Community: Reflection by a Former Aid Worker from Japan’ on 1 December 2021. The author thanks those who have been involved in the effort, and is determined to continue to promote debate on the underexplored issues in our sector.

Concurrently, recognizing racism in the development and humanitarian aid and advocacy sector overall has now shed light on a troublesome question for practitioners and researchers—how should we address racist structures, systems, terminology, concepts, practices, and attitudes? As terms such as decolonisation of aid and anti-racism have already become buzzwords co-opted and utilized by organizations situated in or originating from the global North and may be in danger of becoming catch-all terms for any change initiative, the sector is clearly at a crossroads as to which path to take.³²

²⁸ Interviews conducted between January and August 2021.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Konaka, ‘Under one tent’.

³¹ Shimada, ‘Rethinking development’.

³² Mathews, ‘It’s 2022’.

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