

# ANTI-BLACKNESS & RACISM

## How We Got Here: Our Working Notes

### Working Notes from the Task Force Subgroup

Since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the humanitarian and development sector has had to contend with a **racial reckoning** and confront the deep-seated legacy of **racism** that has shaped and perpetuated our present-day aid structures. As many practitioners, academics, and activists have pointed out, the racism present in modern aid work is not a new phenomenon, but one that has persisted—often unnoticed or ignored by the organizations and individuals dedicated to saving lives and alleviating human suffering.

The Racial Equity Index **defines** racism as the “Belief[s], practices, and upholding of a social, cultural, political and economic system that reproduces a racial hierarchy which benefits white people and oppresses Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.” If using this definition, it is crucial to understand that racism is much more than interpersonal prejudice or discrimination. Rather, racism is a systemic issue that permeates our work and relationships with racially marginalized communities, both at home and in the Global South.

Anti-Blackness refers to the specific dimension of racism directed toward Black people. Anti-Blackness is a “**two-part formation** that both voids Blackness of value, while systematically marginalizing Black people and their issues.”

Anti-Blackness manifests in two forms:

- Overt racism that is underpinned by *structural and systemic* policies, institutions, and ideologies that perpetuate discrimination and prejudice against Black people.
- An individual and societal indifference toward institutions and policies that are harmful or dehumanizing to Black people. While this form of anti-Blackness is protected by overt racism, it also results from the privilege held by those upholding anti-Black power structures.

Regardless of which form it takes, anti-Blackness, and racism as a whole, is rooted in **white supremacy**. The legacies of **colonialism** and racial hierarchies that elevate whiteness simultaneously devalue and oppress non-white people.

Specifically in the humanitarian and development sector, racism and anti-Blackness have been historically **built into our work** and have materialized in two separate yet equally significant ways. In organizational headquarters at “home” (i.e., in the United States), the sector faces the same issues as other American industries with regard to a lack of racial/ethnic diversity and instances of racism in the workplace (be it overt discrimination or **microaggressions**). Beyond our borders, our sector’s challenges regarding race and racism have a profound and visible negative impact on our work and ability to serve communities we are mandated to help.

## Impact Areas

### *At the workplace and in the workforce*

Like many workplace environments, people of color are sparsely represented in leadership positions in the U.S.-based development and humanitarian space. The [BRIDGE Survey](#) conducted in 2021 showed that of the 166 organizations surveyed, only 27% of leadership teams and 10% of heads of organizations identify as BIPOC. Additionally, only 33% of board members in these organizations identify as BIPOC. A lack of representation in leadership inhibits a diverse set of ideas and perspectives—especially when it comes to organization-wide decision-making and the broader policy-making process.

The work culture within the NGO sector is not always welcoming for people of color. Although organizations may claim diversity, equity, and inclusion as core principles, staff are not seeing much of a change especially when it comes to facing racism and discrimination. The [Racism in Aid Survey](#) by the Thomson Reuters Foundation and Aid Works identified the top three most common incidents of racism in the aid sector—microaggressions, pay or benefits discrimination, and being overlooked for promotion or training—while the [Racism, Power, and Truth](#) survey by Bond UK highlighted the deeply-rooted nature of structural racism and the barriers that it creates for people of color in the sector.

When faced with these reckonings, organizations have not had the proper leadership or mechanisms in place to take reports of racism seriously and effectively dismantle the systems or processes that have allowed racism to propagate within their organizations. This ultimately leaves staff of color in the unfair and difficult position of working in hostile environments with little possibility of recourse. Furthermore, the lack of leadership and reporting mechanisms/processes prevents a broader sectoral shift toward true diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### *Racism and Anti-Blackness in our work abroad*

Humanitarian and development work largely centers upon “non-white” parts of the world, often bringing NGO staff into direct relationships with communities of color. Troublingly, aid work has inherited norms from colonial engagement, including the way many people across the sector imagine people of color and the Global South through a problematic [white gaze](#). Through this lens, the sector often places people of color, especially Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, against a model of whiteness—specifically, a [whiteness rooted in the Global North](#)—as the default or highest standard to strive toward. This shapes prejudiced perceptions of the communities we work with, reinforces the sector’s unequal power dynamics, and contributes to the erroneous [white savior](#) mindset.

Going beyond overall racist attitudes, practices, and systems, the notion of anti-Blackness is central to the understanding of our work with Black populations in the Global South. Whether looking at the portrayals of West Africans as “[disease-ridden](#)” and the [unequal treatment](#) of local staff in Sierra Leone during the Ebola epidemic, the [safeguarding scandal](#) in Haiti directly harming Black women, or the more recent discrimination faced by [Black refugees fleeing Ukraine](#), it is clear that there is a specific dimension to our work that is disproportionately harming Black people.

It is time to **own up** to the multifaceted dimensions of racism and anti-Blackness in our histories, structures, and practices, whether those are latent or outright. It is not enough to issue statements decrying racism—it is time to commit to anti-racist action.

## **Recommendations**

1. **Make anti-racism a central part of your work:** Identify, recognize, and analyze how anti-Blackness and racist ideals or practices may show up in your organization. For example, ask: How do racism and anti-Blackness affect your hiring, recruitment, and retention processes?
2. **Engage in ongoing learning, collaboration, and development regarding anti-racism and anti-racist action by:**
  - a. Investing in racial bias training and providing resources for trainings that build awareness and opportunities within the workplace to create an environment conducive to learning about others' cultures, backgrounds, and experiences.
  - b. Create opportunities to engage and involve Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) staff in this process without resorting to tokenism or placing the burden on them.
3. **Understand the complexity of applying anti-racist work to a global lens:** Recognize that the implications of race, ethnicity, color, and nationality for marginalized populations vary in different contexts around the world.