

# The anti-racist agenda of Canada's international cooperation sector: From commitment to action

In the fourth article in our Rethinking Philanthropy series, contributor Judyannet Muchiri looks beyond the promises made in the international cooperation sector's Anti-Racism Framework to outline insights from sector leaders on progress made and key areas of action going forward.

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In May and June 2020, more than 70 international cooperation organizations in Canada publicly committed to “listening and learning” about racial bias and advancing anti-racism **by signing on to the Anti-Racism Framework.**

Whether these promises have translated into effective advancement of racial justice and equity, particularly for racialized groups, is a question the sector is now posing. *The Philanthropist Journal's* **Rethinking Philanthropy series** grapples with this question and more specifically to reflect on anti-racist agendas and propose more just and solidarity-based pathways to racial justice. Previous articles have outlined the process that led to the **development of the anti-racism framework and lessons learned so far**. This article continues the conversation by outlining insights from sector leaders on progress made and key areas of action going forward.

To support signatories in meeting the Anti-Racism Framework's collective commitments, Cooperation Canada, the national council of more than 80 organizations engaged in humanitarian and global development efforts, now hosts the **Anti-Racist Cooperation (ARC) Hub**.

This Global Affairs Canada-funded hub is a resource and expertise centre with an initial mandate of three years. Under the leadership of Barbara Nzigiye and Leila Moumouni-Tchouassi, the ARC Hub aims to leverage economies of scale, allowing more organizations to access training, structures for peer-to-peer support, anti-racism tools and resources, and to implement signatory-driven initiatives. The ARC Taskforce, co-chaired by Musu Taylor-Lewis and Tiyahna Ridley-Padmore, produces reports that offer an overview of sector progress based on the annual survey completed by signatories to the framework.

## What changed?

Signatory organizations acknowledge that the Anti-Racism Framework has led to critical internal examination of organizational practices and policies. As Maïka Sondarjee, member at large of the executive committee of the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development (CASID), notes, "filling in the survey is an annual reminder of what new practices we need to adopt in terms of anti-racism. We have started to put in place mechanisms more formally; for example, having a dedicated person in charge of anti-racism initiatives, including anti-racist statements within our volunteer applications and job advertisements."

Others report similar organizational changes. The Jane Goodall Institute, a sustainability- and community-centred conservation organization, is in the process of updating some of its policies and procedures based on the questionnaire from the Anti-Racism Framework. Similarly, Inter Pares is assessing its policies and existing data to identify equity gaps and opportunities for a more radical and transformational change: "We are working with an inclusion agency to help us design a survey that will support us to build inclusion into strategy and integrate it into processes, culture, and systems," reports Mariétou Diallo, communications co-director at Inter Pares.

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*Jessica Ferne, CanWaCH*

Organizational changes, such as supporting staff and partners to participate in anti-racism learning processes, conducting regular anti-racism audits, providing paid positions for racial justice experts within organizations, fostering collective discussions, and establishing accountability measures are all highlighted as needed for tangible results. “There are some specific tangible things coming from this work ... because we are asking for the specific actions,” notes Jessica Ferne, director of global health impact at the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children’s Health (CanWaCH).

## **Mapping the requirements for further change**

Providing resources for anti-racism efforts **is not only key, it is political**. Ridley-Padmore, who is also policy advisor at World Vision, emphasizes that institutional investment, in terms of time, funding, and emotional labour, is needed to integrate anti-racism in processes, structures, and systems within the philanthropic and non-profit sector.

The ARC Hub will offer some of this support and, as its supporters argue, help sector members break out of silos and avoid duplication. As the co-leads emphasize, ARC will “offer a space where people are comfortable to engage in conversations and anti-racism work and where people are recognized and resourced to engage in this work.”

**Unequal power relations within the sector reinforce racial inequalities. This needs to change, and it has to be reflected in our anti-racism work.**

*Zeila Moumouni-Tchouassi, ARC Hub*

For transformative anti-racist change, the sector will need to be open to shifting power dynamics. As such, organizations are called to re-examine their organizational structures and **racial representation**. As Nzigiyi emphasizes, “There are still some deep-rooted challenges. For example, the sector is very hierarchical, and the people in decision-making positions are a reflection of where the sector is at,” in terms of shifts in racial justice. Questions around power relations should be at the core of anti-racism processes. “Unequal power relations within the sector reinforce racial inequalities. This needs to change, and it has to be reflected in our anti-racism work,” Moumouni-Tchouassi says.

Although the Anti-Racism Framework has delivered formal commitments, progress has reportedly far too often been led by racialized people, often at great personal cost. Is racial justice everyone’s agenda if

change happens primarily thanks to the unrecognized and uncompensated labour of racialized sector colleagues? Advancement of anti-racist agendas should also be examined in terms of the equity of internal processes leading to it.

## The challenge of applying intersectional approaches

Intersectional approaches are paramount to critically examine the quality of anti-racist efforts, and the accountability frameworks resulting from them. By prioritizing the lived experiences, knowledge, and expertise of racialized people without erasing or appropriating the racial justice work that has been led by racialized groups, the sector stands to address its legacy of white saviourism.

An intersectional lens requires that organizations reflect on who is at the centre of their work and how different policies and programs impact diverse groups based not only on race, but on nationality, gender, sexual orientation, disability, et cetera. As Miriam Nobre, a team member at Sempreviva Organização Feminista (SOF) – an NGO working on agro-ecology, feminist economics, and solidarity economics in Brazil – suggests, intersectional approaches enable movements to articulate the interconnectedness of issues such as police violence, environmental injustice, and institutional racism. Such an approach to anti-racism is particularly important for international cooperation organizations, given the complexity of both national and international dimensions of anti-racist work.

## Engagement with international actors

The anti-racist agenda calls on international cooperation organizations to examine their relationships to the inequitable globalized capitalist system. Global North organizations still control the funding, set agendas, and oversee local actors' work. By embodying more equitable practices, some organizations are working to advocate and invest in their local partners' autonomy. The innovative Equality Fund, which connects philanthropists to feminist movements working on urgent social and political problems, for example, “moves flexible, abundant and unrestricted funding to feminist movements.” Similarly, Mennonite Economic Development Associates of Canada (MEDA), an international economic development organization that creates business solutions to poverty, has prioritized the transfer of funds and decision-making to local partners in its new strategic plan.

**We act like we see the problem, like we care ... but we are not really interested in changing power structures.**

*Zubega Wendy Namatovu, No White Saviors*

Civil society actors working with Canadian organizations are still waiting on tangible results. “We are beginning to see anti-racist concerns as a theme, but there are still no experiences in which an anti-

racist perspective articulates the work of the international cooperation organization and its relationship with us,” Nobre says. Similarly, Lubega Wendy Namatovu, a pan-Africanist and team member at the Uganda-based organization No White Saviors, defines the agenda so far as “revolutionary theatre.” She adds, “We act like we see the problem, like we care ... but we are not really interested in changing power structures.”

For anti-racist agendas to allow for genuine relationships of international solidarity, global mechanisms of international assistance would need to be fundamentally restructured. Leticia Rojas, a feminist activist/artist based in Spain and Ecuador, notes, “I have not seen changes in international cooperation; on the contrary, within the framework of budgetary control and the technification [bureaucratization] of these international cooperation organizations, it is impossible to access these funds, much less maintain a horizontal relationship.”

## Seeing the value in other knowledges involves creating space for those knowledges within organizational structures.

*Rachel Barr, VIDEA*

A useful blueprint for the transformation of international assistance is offered by feminist organizations, which call for institutional, social, and organizational change. As Bienvenida Mendoza Benitez, the founder of Escuela de Formación Feminista Antirracista y Descolonial – an organization that works with youth and adolescents from marginalized communities and neighbourhoods in the Dominican Republic – points out, organizations from rich countries should stop imposing agendas and try to dialogue with partners on equal terms. Global North actors can do this, as Nobre suggests, “by leaving it to organizations from the Global South to organize the dialogue: what topics, what formats, what times – the terms on which the debate takes place, because so far we have participated in processes that have been designed by organizations from the Global North.”

## Tracing connections between anti-racism and decolonization agendas

Racial justice cannot be achieved in isolation. As Katelynne Herchak, manager of Indigenous governance and decolonial practices and policy at Canadian youth-oriented charity VIDEA, cautions, anti-racism is intimately tied to the broader agenda of decolonization. The more we decolonize, the more we hold space for diverse peoples and knowledges. Decolonization, therefore, involves recognizing other ways of understanding and solving problems that international cooperation organizations seek to address. “Seeing the value in other knowledges involves creating space for those knowledges within organizational structures,” emphasizes Rachel Barr, head of youth opportunities and leadership at VIDEA.

## The hope is that the anti-racism work will be in conversation with, informed by, and accountable to the people in the Global South.

*Zeila Moumouni-Tchouassi, ARC Hub*

As Moumouni-Tchouassi puts it, the hope is that the anti-racism work “will be in conversation with, informed by, and accountable to the people in the Global South.” Otherwise, she says, it “will limit the scope of our imagination or freedom. If it informs the work going on in the [Global] South, it will set the parameters, shape discourses around anti-racism work, and reproduce harmful practices.” An equitable engagement with international actors, therefore, means providing the space for partners to define their anti-racism agendas in their own respective contexts.

Canada's international cooperation organizations have triggered processes of anti-racist change, moving the sector from mere commitments to more practical changes in policy, practice, culture, and programs. To restructure the sector based on anti-racist principles, organizations will need to centre the lived experiences of racialized groups in Canada but also establish more horizontal and equitable mechanisms of solidarity with partners in the Global South.