

Is racism part of our reluctance to localise humanitarian action ?

mardi 25 août 2020, par [SLIM Hugo](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 5 juin 2020).

This week the Humanitarian Policy Group published a very good report on localisation, from the ground up [1] : it's about time for local humanitarian action. The report provided evidence to explain why the international humanitarian system has seen 'no major shift' in transfers of funding and power to local actors. It described a systemic 'reluctance' in international organisations to live up to the localisation rhetoric in the Grand Bargain and other policy statements. But is the report overlooking one very deep reason for this systemic reluctance : racism ?

In the last few days we have all been challenged to think about the scourge of racism. Heartfelt cries from the streets of US cities have made me think that we should speak more openly of the way racism plays out in humanitarian action. Many of us have politely circled round the subject by referring to the 'neo-colonialism' or 'imperialism' of aid, and its various 'power imbalances'. Some, like Degan Ali, have been explicit about racism in the system [2] but are not well heard by the leaders of the humanitarian community.

I think we members of the white humanitarian elite should now be more direct and speak about a racist gaze that still exists in humanitarian action and the system of white privilege that governs Western humanitarian resources.

It has been a constant struggle in my life as an international humanitarian worker to move beyond a racist gaze and an assumption of white power. Perhaps I am not alone. My opening lecture in the humanitarian courses I run often tells the tale of my journey of change, from a white knight relief worker to a humanitarian companion who works with suffering people in solidarity and accompaniment, not in power and control. But still, my thinking and my heart too often default to racial categories and templates laid deep down within me in my white Western childhood, and in an adulthood filled with Hollywood tropes and the wonderful ease of working with my privileged white peers.

I wonder if racism is at the root of why we can't 'let go' of our international power, as the HPG report urges us to do, and genuinely enable people and power in local organisations and national governments. I suspect it is. Promises that a quarter of international humanitarian finance should go directly to national and local organisations are nowhere near being realised by donor governments and their international intermediaries. This cannot simply be because it is difficult.

There are good reasons why localisation is risky and hard. Aid resources can be politically captured by anti-humanitarian powers. Societies are often genuinely overwhelmed, their institutions destroyed and their people dead, displaced or dispersed. Humanitarian money and resources can be diverted by local corruption and patronage that is damaging and abhorrent to our morality, even if the same patterns of corruption and patronage in the international system are just as open to moral criticism.

But we are clearly still not trying hard enough, and this suggests a deeper reason. We can't quite bear to share the system with 'them'. We don't really trust 'them' to get it right. Our colonial ancestors had misgivings about political independence, and so do we. And we like what we do and the rewards and reputation that it brings. Quite simply, we don't want to give all this away.

I know these feelings and I sometimes see them in the faces of others as they put sensible limits around the 'complementarity' of local and international actors ; when they preach the virtues of localisation on the public stage, while privately joking about aid work and swapping war stories.

Humanitarian workers may also have a particular reason for being confused about racism, which makes us slow to see it in ourselves. In the great majority of wars in which humanitarians have worked they have seen racism played out within these societies. Entrenched racism has been central to violence in wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and elsewhere. In Latin America, violence has often been brutally deployed for racist ends in places like Guatemala and Brazil. Sri Lanka's war was ultimately horrifying for its racism. In West Asia, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is steeped in racism, and the sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria feels just like racism.

Frontline experience may make humanitarians discount the significance of our own racism because we so see so much of it in others. But, here, we have to be very careful to avoid a white conceit that says that our racism is not as bad as theirs. We must not look away from our own racism.

I think it would be right this week if we all agreed to break the taboo around racism and white privilege in humanitarian discourse and the humanitarian system. These moral wrongs should be pointed out when we or others see them or feel them. I'm sure racism is in our system. I'm sure it plays a deep part in our reluctance to localise humanitarian action. And I'm sure we can deal with it because we know it's wrong.

Hugo Slim, Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict

We encourage our readers to submit their own experiences and perspectives on racism in the humanitarian system via the 'Comments' box below.

P.-S.

• odi.org. 5 June 2020 :
<https://odihpn.org/blog/is-racism-part-of-our-reluctance-to-localise-humanitarian-action/>

Notes

[1] <https://www.odi.org/publications/16991-ground-it-s-about-time-local-humanitarian-action>

[2] <https://www.devex.com/news/q-a-degan-ali-on-the-systemic-racism-impacting-humanitarian-responses-95083>