'We're on a journey': antiracist discourse in British development and humanitarian INGOs

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ABSTRACT

On reviewing 30 public statements by British international development NGOs (INGOs) on race and antiracism between 2020 and 2022, this article begins its query with the metaphor of a 'journey'. The idea of a journey is a useful and evocative discursive strategy to portray INGOs as socially and culturally progressive at an extraordinary moment: in the wake of a revived global Black Lives Matter movement and a series of scandals on accusations of racism from INGO staff since 2020. As a discursive strategy, the use of rhetorical devices enables particular self-portrayals of the organisations as thoughtful and action-orientated, and simultaneously reveals wider political manoeuvres to steer organisations complicit in global racism to places easier to navigate. Such a strategy aligns with a wider discursive apparatus that portrays INGOs as caring and compassionate entities. Closely reading these 30 statements, I ask: how is the idea of race, racism, and antiracism used in the text? Exploring in turn, where do British INGOs locate racism in development and humanitarianism? And what is their responsibility for it and to undoing it? Such an exploration reveals discursive tactics for managing charges of racism and demands for transformation in the sector, and how INGOs capture antiracist discourse.

Introduction

The silence surrounding 'race' and racism in international development and humanitarianism is well documented as a condition of whiteness in the aid industry that 'both masks and marks [race's] centrality to the development project' (White 2002, 407; also Wilson 2012). Yet, in the wake of a revived global Black Lives Matter movement and a series of public scandals on accusations of racism from their own staff that have hit international development charities since 2020 (e.g., Busby 2021; Hargrave 2022), 'race' and racism in the aid sector became highly visible. That is, INGOs started to talk openly about racism in the development sector both in public and in private. This article is situated in this period of unprecedented attention and unpacks the discursive response of British INGOs to accusations of racism in the sector. Specifically, I analyse the responses

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contained in a series of 30 public statements published on the institutional webpages of 10 British development INGOs between the start of 2020 and the end of 2022.

I claim both a front row seat and place on the stage in respect to these statements. Between 2021 and 2023, I worked for a British INGO as their principal advisor on race. I took on the role as a 'break' from my full time academic position in a development studies department at a London university, where I have worked since 2012. In reality, the 'break' was not a clean one. I was still supervising doctoral students, writing academic articles, giving research talks, external examining, and occasionally teaching. I mention this to illustrate the blending and bleeding of my NGO role and academic role for two years. My simultaneous position as insider with a job to do and critical outsider, meant that I daily embodied the tension that exists between critical scholarly work and practice-based research on development NGOs (Lewis 2019). In part, through this article, I am able to critically reflect and contextualise some of my own contributions.

At my NGO, I was the first to hold a position advising on race, and to date, am the last. My role gave me an overview of antiracist initiatives and direction in my organisation alongside access to and awareness of my counterparts and their work in similar organisations. By the time I had joined the INGO, they had already issued three public statements on race and antiracism. In fact, the creation of my role was one of the actions publicly pronounced in such a statement. I also co-authored one further public statement within the timeframe I am looking at, which I will discuss later. In developing my argument, I do not focus explicitly on myself nor my practice as principal advisor. As a matter of research ethics, I do not draw on any material that was shared with me with the reasonable assumption it would be used in the course of my role, not my research. Therefore, I focus on statements in the public domain. However, I do lean into my practical knowledge of how to formulate such statements, why and with which publics in mind. In this article then, I step back from a previous professional focus on the formulation of sentences for public and private internal consumption that occupied so much of my time, to see and understand the bigger picture; the discursive strategies of British INGOs deployed to speak to racism.

I argue that British INGOs adopt an antiracist discursive strategy that positions them as passive actors inevitably caught up in the racisms that exist in society in general, and simultaneously active actors taking action to ameliorate the racism they see. Such a strategy, which liberally uses metaphors such as 'journeying' and adverbs like 'truly' or 'actively' to denote action, change and commitment, is revealing of wider political manoeuvres to steer development organisations away from their complicity in global racism to places easier to navigate. In this, antiracist discursive strategies help to situate these organisations within a larger discursive apparatus that casts INGOs as caring and compassionate entities committed to socially just causes.

What INGOs say, how and to whom, matters within wider debates on INGO legitimacy, which have not changed much over the past 20 years (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015). These debates span metaphysical concerns of an INGO's relevance and identity vis-à-vis their role as vehicles for social transformation and development alternatives or public service delivery (Edwards 1999; Fowler 2000); technical concerns over their effectiveness in global struggles for equality (Mitchell 2014); and, in the face of donor dependency and its risk of INGO capture, cross-cutting concerns of accountability and trustworthiness (Keating and Thrandardottir 2017). The question of public trust in an INGO is imperative where northern INGOs solicit funds and support in the north for causes in the global South,

and where the INGO is an intermediary that conveys the values of their northern donors and supporters (Davis, Henson, and Swiss 2020). Therefore, trust in INGOs from these two key publics – donors and supporters – is essential for not only financial solvency, but for affirming INGO claims as legitimate development actors with a broad mandate to do good. However, this public imagination of INGOs as virtuous actors, as Gourevitch and Lake (2012) explore, is not a condition that INGOs can take for granted, but an outcome of careful practices. They write, 'NGOs are, indeed, extremely sensitive to the need for credibility, and increasingly aware that they cannot rely simply on their perceived virtue' (2012, 5). These INGOs through their own communications and wider media reporting, must work to build and maintain public trust in their self-projection as caring and compassionate, especially in the face of any evidence that may suggest otherwise.

Following this introduction, I discuss the role of metaphors to introduce the cultural politics of prevailing narratives of development and situate their use 'in place' i.e., in Britain and in development INGOs. These narratives of development are made and re-made over time through different discursive strategies adopted by development INGOs. I use this discussion for two effects: the first, to illuminate a larger discursive apparatus of British INGOs and their public communications; and the second, to later situate the politics of specific antiracist responses in (re-)asserting and (re-)affirming the corporate identity of development INGOs and through this their capture of antiracist discourse. I then detail the methodological approach to selecting the INGO statements and to deep reading the statements. Finally, I move to present and discuss the statements to address three key questions: how is the idea of race, racism and antiracism used in the text? Where do British INGOs locate racism in development and humanitarianism? And what is their responsibility for racism and to undoing it? Through this discussion I highlight the role of metaphors, before offering concluding comments.

Metaphors, cultural politics and discursive strategies in development

Metaphors are powerful linguistic tools used to create representations or symbols of one thing by using the language of another. The power of a metaphor is the way that 'a small phrase can store a huge number of far-reaching and often unintended revelations and implications through the mutual exchange between two seemingly entirely different discourses' (Noxolo, Raghuram, and Madge 2008, 148–149). This is what makes metaphors particularly interesting linguistic acts in the field of antiracist practice, where speaking 'antiracism' – directly or through metaphor – can be analogous to doing antiracism (Ahmed 2006; Nelson 2015). The normative meaning of a metaphor, therefore, lay as much in what it conceals as what it reveals. As a rhetorical device, metaphors can be used to infer or connote a relationship between concepts that should perhaps not be inferred, or at least deserves scrutiny over the relationship claimed in the metaphor's usage. The use of metaphors in corporate messaging – as a simple bridge to frame audience perception and interpretation of events – is of particular interest in this article. The use of metaphors in corporate antiracism statements serve as frames that define, diagnose, judge and solve corporate racism. For example, the recurrence of the word 'journey' in the antiracism statements of the INGOs I reviewed, is metaphorically rich in its geographical representations of movement and place. It is suggestive to the audience of travelling from one site (presumably material racism) to another (presumably material antiracism) and is

therefore indicative of a plan of action, which in turn is indicative of a definition and diagnosis of the problem and a moral judgement to act. However, the 'journey' as metaphor can leave unspecified a journey to where, how, from where, with whom and for what?

To further unpack the usage of such metaphors and the context in which they are deployed I turn to cultural politics, which is a broad theoretical framework that offers an approach to scrutinising metaphors and linguistic associations for their layered meanings in social and political struggles. When applied by cultural or human geographers, or development scholars – as I do here – the lens of cultural politics offers a way to not only illuminate the meaning and effect of metaphors of antiracist discourse, but their use in place, in specific sites and localities. As the cultural geographer Koft writes, 'These sites are terrains of material struggles over belonging, inclusion, and exclusion' (2020, 112). The cultural politics of narratives of development crafted by development INGOs uses metaphors and other rhetorical devices as tools to help craft particular stories and frame audience interpretation. Narratives of development are borne of and continually shape public imagination in majority-white western countries of the so-called global South or 'developing countries', often in tandem with widespread media representations which together promulgate stereotypes of 'the Other' (Plewes and Stuart 2006). For development INGOs, projecting certain narratives of development is intertwined with its business model with INGOs financed in ways that demands sensitivity to public imaginations of them and their work. As a condition of this environment, INGO fundraising and communication teams play careful balancing acts between three points: accurately portraying the effects of gross global poverty in the so-called global South; motivating people to act in the global North; and, conveying messages of hope and hopefulness for the future to manage the risk of donor fatigue and/or pessimism of the near 80-year development project[1] (Cameron and Kwiecien 2022).

Shuttling between these three points is a range of discursive strategies of INGOs congruent to two particular time periods: 1980–1990s and 2000 onwards. I characterise these as an initial period of explicit corporate messaging to public audiences with openly racist and dehumanising representations of development subjects; and then implicit corporate messaging that appeals to liberal notions of race and antiracism as 'colourblind' through representations of a common sense of humanity, and in which metaphors play an increasingly important role. Early critical scholarship noted the widespread use of images of emaciated black and brown people with accompanying infantilising tropes of helplessness amid abject poverty (Lissner 1981). Dubbed 'poverty porn', the term captures how discourses of development are fed by exploitative practices designed to feed a white-western appetite for voyeurism (Plewes and Stuart 2006). Death, dying and disease were the dominant aesthetic. As a discursive strategy it worked and struck enough of a balance between the three points that financial donations to INGOs and their humanitarian appeals grew (Hudson, Hudson, and Morini 2018). In times of humanitarian and development crisis, the third world child is still wheeled out by INGOs and wheeled back in with a lot of cash donations (Manzo 2008). This is despite many INGOs producing ethical guidance on public communication disavowing such practices (e.g., Oxfam International's Ethical Content Guidelines, Warrington and Fransen 2020).

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[1]If we take as the start date of formal international development as a project of modernity and progress as 1949 and the date of Truman's Declaration.

Today, the state of exception spurred by a 'crisis' allows INGOs to claim they remain attentive to the poverty porn critique, while indulging in it; keeping intact a discursive apparatus of INGOs as caring and compassionate.

Since the 2000s a series of internal and external pressures have engendered new discursive strategies that can be deployed alongside old ones. These pressures include: shifting societal norms when it comes to explicitly racist public remarks and images; INGO absorption of critiques that they propagate problematic and harmful stereotypes of entire regions and groups of people; and better research from INGOs into the communication wants and needs of their supporters. Current approaches generally shift from the western donor/supporter as objective, detached and concerned, to a 'new emotionality' where the feelings, wants and passions of the development donor are made more explicit and the development subject is made implicit (Chouliaraki 2016, 359; Dogra 2011). Metaphors and rhetorical devices that imply, infer and otherwise connote a corporate message are increasingly valuable. Dogra (2011) pinpoints this to deliberate discursive approaches to create a sense of oneness and difference in INGO communications, with sentiments of 'we're all the same, really with similar concerns in life'. The unquestionable focus on such campaigns is on the northern donor and their sense of self and feeling good.

The sensitivity to donor feelings, projections of the northern self, and the care taken by INGOs to package public communication messages around feeling hopeful, which have taken prominence in INGOs latest discursive strategies (Beswick et al. 2019), takes place against a backdrop where the British government's direct funding for INGOs has steadily fallen and income is lower than just five years ago across the board (Tamonan 2023). This is explained by a series of externalities that have impacted INGOs ability to raise funds and thus maintain or grow their presence in the industry. Most notably, the 2020 merger between the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to create the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and soon after government cuts to official Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) from 0.7 to 0.5 per cent of gross national income in 2021. Under DFID, the UK aid budget grew from £2billion in 1997 (when DFID was created) to £15.2 billion in 2020. These two major events meant the loss of a sizeable ringfenced budget for development activities from a major donor to British INGOs. These events came at the same time as financial blows to average British households from the consequences of Brexit (British withdrawal from the European Union) and Covid-19, limiting the abilities of many British households to give charitably and generously. British INGOs are currently navigating strong financial uncertainties in a competitive industry where INGOs collaborate but also fiercely financially compete with each other. In this context, corporate messages that lack a sense of hope and hopefulness, or risk hurting donors' feelings, carry potentially serious financial penalty. This context, alongside discursive strategies that craft INGOs as caring and compassionate entities above all else, sets the discursive landscape and parameters for public antiracist talk in British INGOs in 2020 and the consequent wielding of metaphors.

Reading antiracist talk: methodology and selection of British INGOs and statements

British development INGOs do not engage in race or antiracist talk ordinarily. Race is broadly regarded as a lacuna for the sector (White 2002) and in scholarship on

development (Patel 2020). This is despite deep periodic enquiry that illuminates development as a racialising imperial project (Shilliam 2014; Wilson 2012), humanitarian work as constitutive of white supremacy (Pallister-Wilkins 2021), and the racialising motives of development workers to enact their moral imperative to intervene (Da Silva 2014; Khan, Dickson, and Sondarjee 2023). At this time in the early 2020s, race-talk was becoming more ubiquitous, fuelling conversations about race and racism within the sector (e.g., Green 2023). Though, these conversations depart from scholarly critique by primarily focusing on frameworks of diversity and inclusion for racialised bodies and communities (Pallister-Wilkins et al. 2023).

As far as antiracist statements in the sector go, 2020–2022 were peak years for their production and can usefully be understood as the product of a crisis concerning accusations of racism. Such focused statements did not exist prior to 2020 and have died down since 2023. Therefore, the analytical value of this article lay primarily in unpacking what exactly was meant by the terms race, racism and antiracism when used by development INGOs in public statements between 2020 and 2022. It is the *publicness* of the statements (i.e., that the audience is a public one) that situates them within a discursive apparatus that crafts a public image of INGOs as caring and compassionate. So, while the production and scholarly analysis of corporate public antiracist statements is not a new phenomenon, and development INGOs were one set of actors in many sectors to issue statements that condemned the murder of George Floyd and offer a public reflection on racism (e.g., Brown, Tormos-Aponte, and Wong 2024), the analytical framework in this study foregrounds a critical discourse analysis for development to contextualise and better understand British development INGOs rather than race in society, per se.

In reading the statements, I take 'race' as fluid and dynamic concept, and so aim to locate the meaning of race and its relationship to INGOs in this time (2020–2022) and in a specific set of actions i.e., public statements on antiracism. In this article, one of the key methodological challenges to discourse analysis of race is its application to avowedly antiracist sentiment. I am looking at statements that are explicitly and openly meant to convey a message about race as a subject. The idea of race brought into meaning is intentional. This stands in contrast to many studies of race and racism in Britain where race is located and identified through wide-ranging documents, and the act of research uncovers processes of racialisation, the meaning of race and presence of racism therein (Lentin 2016; Quarish and Philburn 2015). I therefore adopt a grounded approach to see emerging discourses through multiple close readings of the text. These discourses run across statements from a single organisation over 2020–2022, across organisations, and within a single statement. I applied a two-stage coding process to identify these discourses. The first stage was open ended initial coding that summarised clusters of key points in the statements. The second stage was focused coding to generate descriptive codes for dominant discourses (Saldana 2009). In the next section, the statements are organised and discussed by dominant discourses and their descriptive codes.

Selection of British development INGOs

Britain has a large presence of international development NGOs owing to the historic role played by community groups in the interwar period (1919–1938) and after the second world war in forging organisations to support Europe's refugees and internally displaced

people. The origins of Oxfam, Christian Aid, Plan International and Save the Children are rooted in this time, as is CARE International, with aid packages sent from the US to the poor in Europe. As Britain moved to dismantle its administrative Empire, established organisations pivoted to places with greater need and more international development organisations based in Britain were established in the 1950s and 60s with a mandate to help post-colonial populations (such as Action Aid and CAFOD). Since this time, new entrants to the industry have grown the sector to a point where, as reported by Banks and Brockington (2020), in 2015 British INGOs spent almost £7billion; an amount equal to half the UK's aid budget that year, and new INGOs have been set up with the express mandate to coordinate other INGOs. Bond, a UK network for international development organisations established in 1993 with 61 members, now boasts a membership of over 400 organisations of varying size, remit, and sector specialism. This is to say, British international development INGOs are many, longstanding and enmeshed in British imagination as forces for good. Their presence builds on a much longer pre-twentieth century history of charitable giving with its own roots in paternalistic Christian expressions of faith in the country (Lewis 2014), and a 400-year colonial and imperial history with a strong discursive and justificatory narrative of Britain's civilising mission in the world realised through British interventions in native education, governance, economics, religious practice and cultural norms (Watt and Mann 2011).

From a well-established and wide landscape of development INGOs, I selected 10 INGO to focus on in this study. The sample is non-representative and was purposively selected with the following parameters in mind:

- The organisation issued at least one public statement on antiracism between 2020 and 2022.
- The organisation was known to me to be engaged internally on antiracism work (i.e., antiracism was on the organisation's agenda).
- The organisation was not single specialism focused but engaged in a breadth or combination of multi-sectoral development, humanitarian and advocacy work.
- Had public brand recognition (with the assumption that what they had to say on racism played to an interested public audience)
- Collectively, there was a mix of large, medium and small NGOs in terms of annual income and headcount and included a network NGO to capture and express prevailing sector-wide attitudes and ideas. Of the selected organisations, in 2019, the smallest had a headcount of 21 and income of £3.9m and the largest 4174 headcount and £373m in income.
- Collectively, there was a mix of 'trend-setters' (early statement makers) and 'trend-followers' (late statement makers).

The organisations are Bond, CAFOD, Christian Aid, International Rescue Committee UK, Oxfam GB, Peace Direct, Plan International UK, Save the Children UK, Start Network and Tearfund. Organisationally, these INGOs vary from one other: some maintain a UK-based (typically London) headquarters with field offices (e.g., Christian Aid), some are affiliates within a federated model (e.g., Oxfam and Save the Children), and some are membership-based organisations with a largely coordinating function (e.g., Bond and Start Network). Operationally, some are predominantly direct implementers of development

and/or humanitarian interventions, some are partnership-based and work principally through partners in countries of implementation. In this study, the precise INGO model is inconsequential. All of these INGOs need to raise funds and engage in public communication, and therefore are drawn into and sustain a prevailing discursive apparatus that crafts a specific or generic INGO identity as caring and compassionate.

Selection of statements

Over 2020–2022, this group of 10 INGO issued 30 public statements on their organisation's webpage on racism and/or antiracism. These statements took a range of forms including a direct message from the chief executive or chair of the board, a message from the organisation, content marked 'press release', and blog-style writing by INGO staff. These various forms indicate two sets of voices: one is an institutional voice with formal communique when written by an authoritative figure such as a chief executive, or the communications team responsible for crafting organisational public messages; the second is INGO staff (but not the chief executive) who are given a space to voice sentiment that perhaps the organisation itself would not want to be associated with. The content of the statements spans initial declarations on antiracism as well as organisational updates on previously stated actions or commitments over time, including one that I co-wrote in 2022. Importantly, they all appear on the institution's own webpage and are therefore in the public domain and produced for a public audience. See Annex 1 for a list of statements reviewed.

Antiracist talk: findings and discussion

The analysis of 30 statements on race, racism or antiracism from INGOs carried on their organisational webpages between 2020 and 2022, is organised here under five key discourses and their underpinning descriptive codes: (1) validation of the organisation; (2) racism as structural in the sector and simultaneously (3) racism as individualised acts and experiences; (4) implicit and explicit references to current racism; and (5) use of rhetorical devices to infer a relationship between the organisation and race through tools such as metaphors and adverbs. These discourses speak to how the idea of race, racism and antiracism is used in the text, where British INGOs locate it in development and humanitarianism, and their responsibility for it and to undoing it. They also illuminate ways in which INGOs are able to capture 'antiracist' discourse.

Validation of the organisation

The dominant discourse across all organisational statements is one that validates the organisation's core purpose or corporate brand identity. This includes framing antiracism as development work and a core part of the organisation's mission (e.g., addressing root causes of global poverty and inequality or an integral part of achieving 'gender justice'), and, positioning the organisations' stand for antiracism within a longer 'radical' corporate history that imbues the organisation with particular characteristics such as 'bravery' (Oxfam GB, 2020). Within such a framing, taking action to address racism is part of the organisation's mandate. This is further illustrated with reference to a medium and large INGO, Christian Aid and Oxfam GB respectively.

Christian Aid's first public statement issued on 4th June 2020, titled 'Christian Aid statement on Black Lives Matter', illustrates how discourses of antiracism are seen as part of development work and the use of antiracism is used to reaffirm its corporate brand identity.

Part of the statement reads,

> Our mission is rooted in the belief that every human being is made in the image of God and has innate dignity. This belief has been at the ***foundation of our commitment to tackling poverty and injustice throughout our 75-year history***. Our voice has stood firm and in solidarity with marginalised communities from the time we were established. ***We supported the work of Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr in the 1960s during the civil rights movement***. We created the Southern African Coalition to ***demand an end to apartheid in the 1980s***. (Christian Aid, 4 June 2020, ***my emphasis***)

The particular historic credentials presented rely on a 'frozen account' of racism (Lentin 2016). This means past events are perceived to be frozen in a historical time and place and are therefore disconnected from racist logic and structures that craft our contemporary social world. The value of this approach to Lentin (2016, 39) is that racism is consigned as 'extreme behaviour rejected by most ethical or 'right-minded' people, [thus freezing] racism […] in time' and individualising the experience of it (discussed later in more detail). References to Martin Luther King and anti-Apartheid movements in 1980s South Africa become – with hindsight – indisputably antiracist actions performed by the INGO and are intended to shore up the idea that the INGO has a history and track record of antiracism, and so credibility in knowing what antiracism is and what it is not. The absence of more recent or current examples of anti-apartheid activism, with reference to, for example, Christian Aid's work in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, or its antiracist work in post-apartheid South Africa, is avoided in preference of simple uncontested antiracist narratives.

Oxfam GB's first public statement issued as a blog on 3rd June 2020, titled 'Tools to begin your journey towards antiracism', relies on a similar tactic by invoking the INGO's past work on anti-apartheid activism in South Africa. This statement says,

> As an international charity ***founded on the alleviation of global poverty***, spanning almost 80 years, we recognise and confront that our work has its legacy in the UK's colonial and racist past. We also recognise the bravery that Oxfam has shown in the past on these issues – including our ***1980s apartheid stance***, which led to Oxfam being censured by the UK charity commission for being ***too political***. (Oxfam GB, 3 June 2020, ***my emphasis***)

The paragraph is preceded by a bold capitalised heading, 'Without tackling systemic racism around the world, we cannot end global poverty'. Racism in development is thus understood as part of Oxfam's core purpose, and by naming 'systemic racism', the statement resurrects the image of a past Oxfam that might have been politically unpopular, but correct. Unusually for early statements issued across the INGOs, the statement locates Oxfam in British colonialism. However, Oxfam's work as colonial legacy is only in relation to Oxfam's age. There is nothing further on how this legacy manifests in contemporary racism and no clear link between what Oxfam does today and its colonial antecedents. The nod to British colonialism therefore remains in the past, and not a point to interrogate and explain in any detail.

Within the statement, the idea of Oxfam as 'brave' is invoked by the blog authors in a very specific way that is again unusual for these types of INGO statements. In addition to

locating racism in global poverty, the authors write 'We understand that racism is structural, created and sustained by white power and privilege to oppress, dehumanise and exploit Black and non-Black people of colour' (Oxfam, 2020). The naming of white power and privilege suggests Oxfam GB is not fearful or overly concerned by the feelings of white conservative supporters or inculcating feelings of hope amongst this particular group, in line with the dominant discursive strategy. This sentence potentially shifts the discourse on racism as global poverty, to something more explicit that states who/what is responsible for racism, moving away from only acknowledging Oxfam's responsibility for undoing it.

A year later, Oxfam GB publishes another blog titled, 'Why is Oxfam talking about race', written by its chief executive. The blog came after negative media coverage of Oxfam GB surveying their own staff about whiteness in the organisation and media criticism of Oxfam as 'woke posturing' and taking an 'anti-white' stand (O'Neill 2021). This 2021 statement is directed to critics and to supporters who may be concerned by the direction Oxfam is taking and in substance reiterates and reaffirms messages that validate Oxfam's core purpose and corporate brand identity. Oxfam's work on antiracism is framed in relation to a historic sense of 'compassion and justice beyond borders', illustrated with reference to Oxfam's food aid to Nazi-occupied Greece, going even further back in history than apartheid South Africa and invoking Nazis in Europe and their clearly racist ideology.

Additionally, the statement focuses on the individualised effects of racism, noting, 'Racism makes it harder for people to earn a living, feed their children and put a roof over their heads', without any reference to 'white power and privilege' mentioned in the previous statement. In fact, the Chief Executive writes, 'There is no blame game here. Being white does not make someone a racist … '; a sentiment that misreads and misdirects the idea of white power and privilege and unmoors racism in the sector from anything specific or explicit. This inconsistency in messaging hints at internal discord on which corporate public messages to convey on racism and their purpose. Hints of discord are repeated in other INGOs reports on antiracism in this period (Wilson 2023). The intervention of Oxfam GB's chief executive is therefore a decisive one in re-setting the organisational position. It also suggests that the 'bravery' invoked by the authors of the first statement had two audiences, one external and a reminder of the corporate brand as political and therefore brave, and the second internal to Oxfam's leadership and an encouragement to acknowledge the causes and effects of contemporary racism in the sector.

Illustrated by these two corporate examples, the prevailing effect of contextualising this moment (2020–2022) in a corporate track record is to position the organisation on the right side of history by taking a public stand on racism. This places the responsibility for undoing racism with INGOs and their existing mandate for poverty alleviation. Though, without taking any responsibility for racism in the sector or in their organisation. Thus, the prevalence of this discourse illustrates how INGOs retain their moral compass as a caring and compassionate organisation, despite pointed accusations of racism in the workplace levelled at them by their own staff (Bond 2021).

Racism is structural to the sector and individualised

The public entry point to racism in development is largely events in 2020, forced by global momentum around Black Lives Matter and public reports into the experiences

of racially minoritised staff employed by INGOs (Busby 2021; Hargrave 2022). This is in contrast to any sustained effort for a public conversation on longstanding critiques of the development industry as neocolonial and built upon the racist logic of creating and reinforcing the subordination and relative superiority of groups of people we may label 'the helped' and 'the helper'. I suggest that as a result of this, racism in these public statements is framed in two discrete and co-constitutive ways: racism is defined as structural to the sector but understood and engaged with as individualised acts and experiences. This dualism is navigated by positioning the INGO as part of sector-wide racism but also a victim of racism with specific individuals falling short of organisational standards and codes of conduct. This is illustrated with reference to public statements from Save the Children UK and Tearfund UK, a large and medium sized INGO respectively, and the Start Network, a UK-based secretariate for a network of over 90 humanitarian I/NGOs.

As discussed previously, by using antiracism to validate an INGO's core purpose, racism is materially located in global poverty and is therefore a structural cause of both. In complement, racism is discursively articulated as something that exists in society – in these statements, sometimes with reference to British colonialism and sometimes not – logically, INGOs are a part of society and therefore affected by racism too. The International Rescue Committee UK succinctly capture this in their 30th October 2020 statement by invoking Black Lives Matter to say 'it highlighted the systemic and structural racism that exists in the UK' and that this prompted discussions of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the organisation. In writing about racism as structural to the sector, racism is framed as something that simply happens to the organisation.

An illustration: Save the Children UK issued 'A statement of solidarity from the leadership' on 19th June 2020. Published two weeks after Oxfam GB and Christian Aid's initial statements, it begins with the now fairly established convention of referencing its own corporate identity and history, rooting any responsibility for tackling racism within a discursive apparatus of a caring and compassionate INGO. It states,

> Our founders laid the groundwork for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which establishes racial discrimination as a violation of child rights. We have a duty and a responsibility to defend all children everywhere against discrimination based on race and gender. (Save the Children UK, 19 June 2020)

The statement then moves to locate racism in the sector and in Save. It says,

> We acknowledge the institutional racism that exists within the charity sector and our organisation and affirm our commitment to using our power as leaders to tackle both. **We take responsibility as leaders of an organisation that is part of development and humanitarian sectors** which have racism, colonialism and white supremacy deeply embedded in **their** mindsets, culture, practices and structures. (*Ibid, my emphasis*)

The statement defines racism as structural to the sector, not only in terms of racialised outcomes of global poverty and inequality, but in development and humanitarian 'mindsets, culture, practices and structure' (*Ibid*). However, the point is not further developed in this statement, with speculation or examples of how such a mindset, culture, practice or organisational structure is reflected in Save or its leadership. Instead, the use of the word 'their' carves a space for the INGO and its leadership that acknowledges racism around them, but also sets Save and its leadership apart. The statement implies that

Save is merely an arena for racism that exists in the sector as a whole and that Save's leadership (an all-white leadership team at the time of the statement) are best placed to take action.

Within the statement, the Save leadership pledge to quarterly public reporting on progress on their antiracism commitments (though these reports are made for only one year with subsequent progress reports incorporated into Save's standard organisational reporting to its trustees). The foregrounding of the leadership is notably different from other INGO statements where the voice of the statements is either a chief executive or the whole organisation. In the first of their four public statements, the leadership writes, 'A commitment to listen – deeply and repeatedly – is our first commitment' (Save, 19th June 2020). This is followed by an acknowledgement that, 'Listening is a necessary but insufficient condition for change' and so further pledges are made with the promise 'We will make more commitments as we learn more' (*Ibid*). While perhaps a noble gesture and illustration of a leadership willing to reflect and change, a further effect of this manoeuvre is to individualise racism and antiracism to its leaders and as a learning project, and not to the organisation and its core work including its mindset, culture, practices and structures and the 'white supremacy' deeply embedded within. There is no further reflection or question raised, that given the failing of this set of leaders to act on racism previously, that they remain best placed to do so now.

By the final public progress update on 9th September 2021, titled 'External Closing Report', the primacy of individuals learning dominates. The leadership write, 'we will be reflecting and working hard to drive further and faster change', adding, 'We've learned a lot collectively and individually about issues that we need to consider, and that our learning needs to be constant and ongoing'. Such commitment to learning is coded into staff 'performance objectives and workplace behaviours', marking a tone of a fundamentally sound organisation but one where individuals need to know a little more to do a little better. Any concrete connection to racism, colonialism and white supremacy in Save is unclear or serves as background to individual learning.

A similar pattern is observable in Tearfund UK and the Start Network. In an August 2020 statement titled 'Tearfund's anti-racism statement', Tearfund UK wrote, 'There is a legacy of colonialism that has contributed to inequality in many of the countries in which we work. This has tainted the experiences of people who live in or have their roots in these places'. I note that Tearfund is an evangelical INGO and there is a longer critical current of thought on the role of individualism in western evangelical movements (Rojas 2023). This may help to explain why the statement sees the racism of colonialism and its legacy in 'broken relationships, and [that] broken relationships keep people trapped in cycles of poverty'. The statement, unsurprisingly therefore, declares boldly, 'To be Christian, therefore, must mean being actively anti-racist in both word and deed'. I do not question the veracity of this, but note its individual responsibilising effect and how these filter into the antiracist commitments Tearfund UK makes. These include: 'a programme of education about racial injustice' led by 'our D&I Manager, a Black woman', recruitment for a diverse board and executive leadership team, and better reporting on race (which is part of building an infrastructure for diversity). I include this illustration from Tearfund as a point of contrast to INGOs that do not share Tearfund's ideological and theological lens and assessment of the impact of colonialism and racism, but who land in the same place on antiracism commitments.

The Start Network's statement on 10th June 2020, titled 'Black Lives Matter', is written by their CEO who self-identifies as a white American woman writing in a personal and professional capacity but on the organisation's institutional webpage. She writes,

> As an organisation and network, we **are in a position to effect positive** change in the societies in which we operate … As a network, **fundamental to our vision** is shifting these privileges and power. And we recognise the link between the **system's power imbalances and racism** … (Start Network, 10 June 2020, **my emphasis**)

The link between the 'system's power imbalances and racism' is not clearly articulated but loosely inferred by a call for humanitarian aid 'to be more local, more inclusive, more representative of and attuned to communities affected by crises'. Antiracism as a discourse appears swallowed by another prominent discourse in humanitarian circles since the Grand Bargain of 2016,[2] localisation. The INGO is positioned a part of a system of power imbalances somehow linked to racism, and simultaneously apart from this system with a fundamental vision to change it. In a creative piece of circular logic, the CEO writes, 'developing an anti-racist organisation must be an ongoing commitment to listening, to acting and to holding ourselves to account to our values and the commitments we've made'. Antiracism for the Start Network is upholding its own values, without critical reflection on the values themselves.

Where antiracism is written about in a way to validate the organisation and its core work including its corporate standards and values, racism is framed as external to the organisation and something that happened to it. This supports an individualised understanding of racism consistent with theories of liberal racism (Kundnani 2023); evident in diversity commitments, individual learning, and where employees risk falling short of corporate standards and values, and without any discernment between racially minoritised and majority groups within the organisation. Such a definition and understanding of racism closes space to query the organisations' own racialising standards, values and actions.

Racism as implicit, explicit and in metaphor

Running across all 30 statements is an interplay between implicit references and explicit definitions of current racism. What is made explicit in the text is noteworthy on three counts. The first, there is very little that is made explicit. The second where and how racism is unequivocally defined in relation to white power it is subsequently shut down or deflected. The third, the word 'complicity' is applied to situate an INGO in a broader landscape of racial discrimination and how the INGO contributes to it, but this complicity is problem-solved through appeals to the organisation's own values.

Explicit definitions of current racism were apparent in a few sentences that named whiteness, white power and anti-Blackness, and the subsequent treatment of any explicit reference to 'white'. As discussed earlier, Oxfam GB's first statement denouncing 'white power and privilege' (3rd June 2020), is a stance walked back by its chief executive. He reframes the sentiment of the systematic and historic accumulation of power by groups of

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[2]The Grand Bargain was an agreement reached in 2016 between the UN Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) member states, UN agencies and INGOs to improve aid delivery. See https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain.

white people to more base terms of phenotypically white individuals with his comment, 'Being white does not make someone a racist' (28th July 2021). For Bond the tension between explicit and implicit references to racism and ideas of white power played out within its single statement on 2nd June 2020. The statement avoided explicit definitions of racism erring on banal exposition, 'Everyone should have the right to live with dignity, regardless of race, religion, disability, gender, age or sexual orientation'. The statement concludes however by referencing additional resources titled 'Anti-racism resources for white people' and 'Ways to be in action against anti-Black racism', allowing the organisation to explicitly name racial groups but indirectly and at arms-length.

The clearest illustration of where INGOs makes explicit their role in the racism of the sector is in the statements of Peace Direct, a humanitarian INGO. In April 2021, Peace Direct issued a statement titled, 'Tackling Structural Racism and our commitments to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion'. In a boxed standalone section with its own heading titled, 'Peace Direct's solidarity statement by Organisations and Individuals Against Racism', they write,

> As an international peacebuilding organisation based in the UK and US, we bear a responsibility to work internally and actively within our own communities to build a society based on justice, nonviolent transformation of conflict, and human dignity for all. We recognize our own **complicity** within systems of oppression and injustice which have shaped our countries and the current global order, and we remain committed to working with local people to stop violence and build lasting peace. (Peace Direct, April 2021, **my emphasis**)

The word complicity is instructive (and novel in the context of all the statements reviewed) in situating Peace Direct in a broader landscape of racial injustice, though it remains light on the details of how exactly it is complicit. A blog by the Chief Executive on 19th May 2021 titled 'Are country offices preventing us from decolonising development?' provides some clarity. It says, 'country offices are […] often one of the most visible and entrenched manifestations of structural racism in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding system'. It adds, because they allow INGOs to extend and control their own operations, while country offices remain subordinate to the national headquarters situated in a western country. This lucidity is unique. The dilemma, as reported here, is resolved with recourse to Peace Direct's own values and their manifestation in an agenda of 'localisation'.

In the April 2021 statement, Peace Direct write,

> We exist to challenge the *status quo*. To rebalance relationships and power in favour of local people and communities rather than international agencies. Our approach differs from the mainstream international models for development, peace and security, which are often rooted in neocolonialist thinking, and actively discriminate against people and the communities of the Global South. (Peace Direct, April 2021)

Having opened a space for critical self-reflection on an organisational level through the use of terms like 'complicit', Peace Direct walks back to situating themselves outside of the racism in the sector and the role of INGOs in sustaining or perpetuating its racism.

More prevalent in the statements is an implicit reference to racism in the INGOs and the sector through actions claimed as 'antiracist'. For example, Christian Aid in their 14th October 2020 statement titled, 'Christian Aid announces steps to address racial injustice', adopts the phrase of becoming 'a truly anti-racist organisation'. This is interesting

because Christian Aid's first and earlier statement on 4th June 2020 ('Christian Aid statement on Black Lives Matter') did not use the words 'race', 'racism' or 'anti-racism' at all, racism is raised only through the explicit naming of Black Lives Matter. The idea of anti-racism then serves as a powerful semantic hook for organisations to take some kind of action without having to name the racism in their organisation or the complicity of their organisation in sector-wide racism.

This pattern is repeated by Plan International UK and their 2021 'Anti-racism at Plan International' statement. This statement locates ideas of race in 'racial justice' linking it to 'gender justice for girls' (the INGO's core mission) and hooks onto 'antiracism' as the means 'to build a fully inclusive and anti-racist culture' at Plan. The statement goes on to list actions Plan is committed to taking which all use the language of antiracism to infer racism in the organisation without ever naming it as racist. For example, actions listed include:

- Leadership commitment to focus attention and resources on anti-racism, while continuously learning and reflecting on how to realise our vision on anti-racism.
- The creation of our Anti-Racism and Equity Council and Regional Task Forces to share insights and experiences to inform our anti-racist work …
- A review of language and images used in our communications, and creation of a glossary for staff of positive, empowering and non-discriminatory language. This will ensure we share stories that align with and support our commitment on anti-racism. (Plan International, 2020).

Antiracism as a placeholder infers racism is largely not knowing about racism and using bad words (whatever the intent). Racism is not then about hierarchies of racialised value, the making of groups of people as superior and inferior, bodily violence and harm enacted on 'inferior' groups, or lives diminished and cut short, nor of the work of development INGOs therein. A follow up statement on 19th August 2021 by the Plan International's Chief Executive titled, 'Our commitment to anti-racism: where are we now and what happens next?' continues with a positive framing of racism in the INGO as antiracism and antiracist actions with liberal use of Plan's 'journey' and desire to be 'actively anti-racist … becoming an anti-racist organisation'. Linguistically, what goes unsaid is that Plan, logically, must be a racist organisation. In the absence of an explicit diagnosis, remedies frame a continuous state of learning about racism and journeying to somewhere that is not here as antiracism.

Thus, in the absence of clear and sustained explicit references to racism and the liberal use of placeholders for racism, rhetorical devices serve a useful function to not only confer a symbolic relationship between the organisation and racism but to claim an intention in their response that is otherwise opaque. Such devices include metaphors of 'journeys' used to connote a direction of travel for the organisation (and confirm that there *is* a direction of travel), and adverbs like 'truly' and 'actively' to connote a serious regard for the subject matter in the face of a weak diagnosis. These rhetorical devices serve to express a relationship and, in organisational statements, craft a connection between the organisation and the purpose of the statement – racism, but in a way that does not add meaningful clarity. That is, rhetorical devices are suggestive of a significant relationship between concepts (the organisation and racism) but without any apparent detail on what is that significance.

On a journey. Some concluding remarks

The initial and critical point of entry in this article is the use of a metaphorical 'journey' that British INGOs embark on as an expression of their responsibility for helping to undo racism in the sector at large. Metaphors, while serving as discursive frames, often conceal as much as they reveal about the structural dynamics of racism within these INGOs and the broader development sector. The discourse of the 'journey' allows for ambiguity regarding the destination, starting point, means of travel, and fellow travellers. It allows for an idea of action unmoored from a clear and accurate diagnosis of the problem. It centres the INGO as a caring and compassionate organisation moved by its own values and mission to take responsibility for undoing racism, by capturing 'antiracist' discourse, and without deeply or meaningfully unpacking its complicity or own racialising acts. Above all, it suggests movement, and through mere suggestion, enables stillness. Following Ahmed (2006), I suggest this is rather the point of the metaphor as a rhetorical device and institutional speech act. Through this suggestion of movement, INGOs are able to rehabilitate their reputation and that of the sector, reinstating their position as 'virtuous' organisations (Gourevitch and Lake 2012), and to their core public of donors and supporters reaffirm that they are ultimately trustworthy and legitimate actors that do good.

The idea of journeying sits within a discursive apparatus built around sensitivity to public imaginations of INGOs and their work. Typically, where INGO public communications aim to balance portrayals of global poverty, motivate action amongst supporters, and inculcate feelings of hope for the future, in the context of widespread accusations of racism in the sector and in specific INGOs, public communication manages to lead public interpretations of racism as enfolded within the INGOs existing work and mandate, and as something primarily invested within specific individuals who are falling short of corporate values and are engaged in redemptive remedies of self-directed learning. That is, these statements strike a discursive balance between acknowledging organisational shortfalls and falling short of any wider organisational responsibility for the racism in and of development.

So while the statements actually move against the typical 'antiracist-playbook' of denial, deflection and distancing (Lentin 2016), by acknowledging a problem of racism in the sector, action against racism is enfolded into the work of a caring and compassionate INGO. Crucially, through liberal diagnosis and definition of racism, and repeated commitment to journeys of improvement, INGOs can discursively satisfice demands for transformation in the sector arising from their public audience. This is despite pointed accusations of racism in the workplace, calls of INGO complicity, and charges of neocolonialism of the sector. This pattern holds a wider significance within traditional post-development critiques by identifying a dualistic narrative within INGOs that positions them both as part of sector-wide racism and as victims of individual shortcomings, thereby navigating responsibility for addressing racism in a way that falls short of systemic or transformative change, which may well be the point.

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Annex 1 Organisational statements reviewed

INGO	Statement title	Date
Bond	Bond statement on racism, structural inequalities and injustice on the wake of George Floyd's death	2 June 2020
CAFOD	On the matter of black lives	June 2020
	Diversity and Inclusion	Not known
Christian Aid	Christian Aid Statement on Black Lives Matter	4 June 2020
	Christian Aid announces steps to address racial injustice	14 October 2020
	5 steps we are taking to become a truly antiracist organisation	14 October 2020
	5 steps we are taking to become a truly antiracist organisation: update	6 October 2020
IRC UK	IRC-UK's Commitments to Diversity, Equality and Inclusion	30 October 2020
Oxfam GB	Tools to begin your journey towards anti-racism	3 June 2020
	How to decolonise international development: some practical suggestions	18 December 2020
	Why Oxfam is talking about race	28 July 2021
	A call to action: Racial Justice	Not known
Peace Direct	Tackling structural racism and our commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion	April 2021
	Are country offices preventing us from decolonising development?[a]	19 May 2021
	Covid-19 has shown us how to decolonise development[a]	16 June 2021
	It's 2022 and Decolonising Aid finds itself at a crossroads: which path will you take[a]	10 February 2022
	Reflecting on a year of working to decolonise peacebuilding[a]	26 April 2022
Plan International UK	How to be an anti-racist ally	2020
	Anti-racism at Plan International	2021
	Our anti-racism principles	2021
	Our commitment to anti-racism: where are we now and what happens next?	19 August 2021
	Thoughts on decolonising the aid sector: parts 1 and 2	March 2022
Save the Children UK	A statement of solidarity from the leadership of Save the Children UK	19 June 2020
	An update on Save the Children UK's Anti-racism commitments	23 October 2020
	An update on Save the Children UK's Anti-racism commitments	22 February 2021
	External Closing Report	9 September 2021
Start Network	Black Lives Matter	10 June 2020
Tearfund UK	Tearfund's anti-racism statement	August 2020
	An update on Tearfund's anti-racism work in 2021/22	August 2022
	Doing a new thing: an update on Tearfund's anti-racism work	31 October 2022

[a]These were published as blogs on Peace Direct's webpage and via Bond.