

Advancing the anti-racist agenda In international cooperation

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Introduction

The fight against racism cannot wait. The instability brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequalities, and race is a crucial element determining how individuals are impacted by the pandemic. The international cooperation sector is committed to the values of equity, inclusion and solidarity, and calls for individual and collective responsibility to prevent the perpetuation of systemic racism in white-dominated spaces of the Global North as well as in historically disadvantaged countries. This session discussed strategies and operational challenges of pursuing anti-racist agendas in the international cooperation sector, as part of Cooperation Canada's biweekly series [Shifting cooperation paradigms: adapting to a changing context in the COVID pandemic](#).

Highlights

The webinar discussed strategic and operational challenges organizations should consider when embarking on organizational change that would allow for a more anti-racist structure and processes. Given that anti-racist change is not a short-term, linear process, panelists discussed the challenges of defining and measuring institutional but also sector-wide progress towards anti-racist commitments, and strategies for overcoming them in a collaborative and transparent manner.

The sector of international cooperation, its logical pillars, international institutions, and processes are deeply embedded in white-centric approaches often perpetuating the colonial legacy of the sector, which marginalizes communities in historically disadvantaged countries. Recognizing the need for our sector to redress its structures and relations with partners and communities in the Global South was highlighted as a key requisite. For this to happen, institutions in the Global North must undergo significant transformations. We need to question and challenge ethnocentric, white-centric and neocolonial approaches to affect real change. Comments focused on the need of co-creation and co-implementation of programs with local partners, and for decision-makers of the Global North to deliberately educate themselves on the complexity of systemic racism and question their support for transformative efforts in this area. Reflections also broached the topics of accountability and political will to tackle racism at all levels, including in an outward-facing and transparent manner. Panelists focused on the importance of dialogue and highlighted the need of a principled pragmatic approach to address the topic of racism going forward.

As stated by one of the panelists, Odette McCarthy, "to counter racism, we must name it, understand it, and act upon it." The fight against racism must be approached from an intersectional perspective and be adapted in different local contexts. It must be deeply embedded in our organizations and in our work as a sector. This is a fight of us all.

Fundamental aspects of anti-racism agendas

- 1) **Recognize.** Understand what racism is at the systemic level, recognize the existence of the problem and identify obstacles such as ignorance, power paradigms, and lack of mutual comprehension.
- 2) **Question.** Educate people and organizations to be able to question structural issues (colonialism, privilege, patriarchy, "white savior complex") instead of replicating them. Spaces of dialogue and openness to listen play important roles in this process, where mutual learning is key.
- 3) **Act.** Harness partnerships so that the voices of the marginalized and oppressed are heard. Create a plan with concrete actions to advance work on anti-racism. Develop policies and programs whose strategies challenge power structures and are effective to create real impact.

To ensure a more coordinated approach in advancing the anti-racism agenda in our sector, Cooperation Canada has formed an advisory group, which has elaborated an anti-racism framework for the sector. Please contact Cooperation Canada for details on how to participate in the co-construction of the Framework.