Decolonisation, really?

From Intention to Impact in our Decolonial Journey

Executive Summary



Plan International Belgium position paper on anti-racism, decolonisation and localisation.







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This position paper is the result of a long and necessary journey: one that has challenged us to move from intention to impact. As an organisation committed to justice and equality, we knew we had to go beyond buzzwords and take an honest look at the structures that shape our work. In doing so, we uncovered more about ourselves than we had expected.

International cooperation is built on powerful commitments to solidarity and to ending unbearable inequalities. Yet, it is also the legacy of a colonial system that continues to replicate power imbalances and injustices. For too long, our sector has been caught in a status quo that conceals these uncomfortable truths. To avoid the unease they provoke, we have collectively chosen colour-blindness and watered down important concepts - seeing only what makes us comfortable rather than what needs to be changed.

This paper is an act of courage. It reflects our willingness to question the status quo, to hold up a mirror to our sector and our own organisation, and to sit with the discomfort of difficult truths and complex paradoxes. Instead of turning away from them, we confront them, bringing them into the light. Only by doing so can we advocate for real change and shape a new way forward.

This journey will not be easy: it is a bumpy road. But it is the right one to take. This is only the beginning. Here, we outline our position and our commitments, knowing that true transformation requires sustained action and collective accountability towards change.

My deepest gratitude goes to the many scholars and practitioners from the Global South who have spoken these truths for too long without being heard by organisations like ours. To those who helped shape this paper, challenging us from within – staff, partners, and peers – thank you for your persistence. And to the people of colour in our organisation who have waited too long for clear commitments to anti-racism, who have faced the weight of white discomfort, yet continued to push for change: thank you for your patience, your bravery, and for making this organisation better.

Isabelle Verhaegen

Plan International Belgium National Director

Introduction

In recent years, discussions around the decolonisation of aid, anti-racism, and localisation have gained momentum within the international development and humanitarian sectors. Global movements, fuelled by the broader discourse on racial and social justice, have challenged longstanding power imbalances in aid, development, and governance structures for decades, but have finally started to be heard. These conversations are driving critical examination of how aid continues to replicate colonial hierarchies, marginalise voices from the Global South, and perpetuate systemic racism.

Organisations across the globe, including Plan International, are responding to these shifts with various frameworks and initiatives, including the <u>Pledge for Change</u> on localisation and commitments to anti-racist principles in aid. Plan International Inc. has launched key initiatives to address these issues, including establishing an Anti-Racism and Equity Council advising senior leadership; signing the Pledge for Change; developing the "Locally Led, Globally Connected" position paper, and, more recently, setting up a dedicated department focused on localisation and decolonisation.

Plan International Belgium recognises the urgency of contributing to these important discussions. To clarify our stance on these interconnected issues, we have developed this position paper on the decolonisation of aid, localisation, and anti-racism in aid. It relies on a rigorous methodology involving over 100 peer-reviewed articles and grey literature material, using a feminist lens throughout our analysis that enables us to acknowledge the intersectionality of race, gender and colonial histories in shaping inequalities in the aid sector. The work has been done by a core working group of Plan International Belgium that committed to centring the perspectives and scholarship of people of colour, women in particular, in our literature review, and identifying the position of the organisation and its key commitments. The paper was further reviewed by experts and specialists, within the Plan International Federation and by external experts in Belgium.

An important series of disclaimers opens the paper. While we value the work of defining the key terms at stake, we agree that identifying actionable steps to dismantle the systems of oppression we describe is more important than rigidly and perfectly defining terms. We also decided to use the term 'Global South' in this paper to refer to economically marginalised and historically colonised nations, despite the legitimate critique the term carries of providing homogenised views of various and diverse contexts. This paper also confronts our organisation with paradoxes and hard choices to be made, shining light on contradictions between our motivations and objectives and some of our pragmatic and financial choices. We decided to acknowledge such paradoxes rather than shying away from them. Finally, we recognise the most central contradiction of creating this paper as a European-based international NGO, taking up space in a discussion that should prioritise the voices of people of colour and Global South organisations. We do so by clearly stating that we remain accountable towards them, and that articulating our position is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, step towards meaningful engagement.

Our position paper starts with the necessary exercise to carefully, accurately define the terms that are present in the public debate, so much so that they have become buzzwords. This step has enabled us to disentangle what really is at stake with our organisation: reducing the tangible harms of colonisation and neocolonialism is not the same as decolonisation.

All references can be found in the Full Position Paper.



2. Key concepts

Racism is a system of oppression privileging one racial group over others through institutional policies, economic structures, and social hierarchies. It is deeply rooted in white supremacy, an ideology that normalises white dominance and marginalises racialised communities (Racial Equity Tools, 2021). White supremacy is not limited to extremist groups but is embedded in the structures of education, employment, governance, and decision-making (DiAngelo, 2018).

Colonial expansion has institutionalised racism as a justification for subjugation, framing colonised peoples as biologically and culturally inferior. This ideology has underpinned slavery, segregation, forced labour, and state-sanctioned violence, creating systemic racial inequalities that persist today (Bonilla-Silva, 2007). The categorisation of people by race has historically served to uphold power structures, with colonial and post-colonial economies built on the exploitation of racialised labour (Coello de la Rosa, 2000).

Despite formal decolonisation, racism continues to shape economic and political realities. Systemic injustices – such as disproportionate incarceration rates, police brutality, and economic disenfranchisement – are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a long-standing global system that continues to benefit white populations (Crenshaw, 1989; Fanon, 1963).

Acknowledging Belgian context: Belgium's colour-blind reality

As an organisation with a long-term, deep-rooted social base throughout Belgium, we are immersed in Belgian society. It is essential to understand this social, political and economic context and how it affects our workplace.

Belgium's colonial legacy remains largely unacknowledged, with race being a taboo subject in public discourse. Post-Holocaust ideological shifts led to the rejection of racial categorisation, reinforcing a belief in a post-racial society (Baruti, 2021). This is further perpetuated by colour-blind ideologies that deny the relevance of race, hindering conversations about systemic racism (Essed et al., 2019).

Euphemisms like *diversity*, *ethnic background*, or *integration* obscure racial discrimination by reframing it as a cultural or linguistic issue. As a result, racialised individuals – even those who are second- or third-generation Belgian citizens – are positioned as outsiders (Ceuppens, 2006; Kanobana, 2021).

Within organisations like Plan International Belgium, discussions on race are often diluted into broader themes such as LGBTQI+ rights, disability or poverty, limiting the organisation's ability to address racial inequalities explicitly. This avoidance prevents meaningful anti-racism action and reinforces existing disparities. This attitude is anchored in Belgium's institutionalised refusal to collect disaggregated racial and ethnic data under the guise of neutrality prevents the proper measurement of systemic racism (CERD, 2021). This contributes to a lack of targeted anti-discrimination policies and slow, inconsistent efforts to combat racism.

Public controversies, such as the persistence of colonial-era statues (e.g., King Leopold II) and racially insensitive traditions like Zwarte Piet, are downplayed as debates over historical memory, rather than acknowledged as manifestations of ongoing racial inequality (Azabar et al., 2023; Rutazibwa, 2017).

Despite widespread denial, studies highlight the enduring impacts of systemic racism. In policing, racial profiling is widespread, with 41% of people of African descent reporting police stops and 31% describing their treatment as disrespectful (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). Yet police brutality is framed as isolated misconduct rather than a systemic issue (Amnesty International, 2021). Nearly 50% of individuals of African descent experience housing discrimination, and 33% of racialised workers are in temporary contracts, compared to 7% of the general population (Unia, 2022). Muslim women face additional discrimination, particularly those who wear headscarves, leading to economic insecurity and social exclusion (ENAR, 2016).

The silencing of racism in public policy creates a cycle of invisibility where systemic issues remain hidden and unaddressed, further marginalising racialised individuals (Sankaa vzw, 2023).

Racism and white supremacy in the global aid sector

As a development and humanitarian organisation with a mandate to advance the cause of girls' rights, we are also rooted in the development aid sector, which continues to fail at addressing racism and white supremacy.

- White leadership and decision-making power. Despite discussions on localisation and anti-racism, the aid sector remains dominated by white-led organisations (Roepstorff, 2019). Leadership structures are primarily white, influencing funding decisions and programme priorities, while Global South expertise remains marginalised. Western standards of professionalism favour white norms, limiting leadership opportunities for people of colour. Even when leaders from the Global South are included, their roles are often symbolic, lacking decision-making power. (Crewe et al., 2006).
- Western development models and knowledge systems: Aid organisations privilege Western
 models of governance, finance, and problem-solving, devaluing Global South knowledge systems (Spivak,
 1998). This creates dependency on Western frameworks, ignoring local traditions and methodologies. For
 example, monitoring and evaluation tools are designed by donors in the Global North, requiring Global
 South civil society organisations (CSOs) to adopt rigid, technical indicators that do not reflect their lived
 realities (Roepstorff, 2019).
- The white saviour narrative. Aid communication often portrays Global South communities as helpless and Western actors as rescuers, reinforcing racialised power hierarchies (Kapoor, 2004). This erases local agency, dictating which voices and solutions are prioritised in the aid sector (Pailey, 2019).

Aid, Colonialism and Neocolonialism

Aid, as a global sector, has a history intimately linked to the colonial history of the Global North, of which certain practices persist at all levels, despite the shared conviction by aid workers that their mission is anchored in social justice and positive change. It is essential to understand this history to identify the ramifications that are still playing out today and affecting our workplaces.

The link between aid and neocolonialism is deeply rooted in the history of international development, where colonial domination has evolved into a development discourse that maintains hierarchical relationships. Aid and colonial heritage share the guise of a 'civilising mission' framed as a moral obligation to uplift 'backward' societies that resonated with early forms of humanitarian aid. Aid efforts used to serve dual purposes: to legitimise colonial rule and to mitigate the adverse effects of colonial exploitation (Betts, 2020; Ziai, 2016), so that aid could be both a tool of compassion and a mechanism of control, reinforcing colonial power structures. In fact, up until 1961, the Belgian Ministry of Development Cooperation was called the Ministry of Colonies (NGO Federatie, 2021).

Neocolonialism maintains post-colonial dependency through mechanisms like economic control, such as trade agreements and debt dependencies that favour former colonial powers (Betts, 2012). Political and military interventions and cultural imperialism, where Western knowledge systems, languages, and values are imposed, marginalise Global South expertise (Said, 1978). A visible and active mechanism of neocolonialism is official development aid (ODA) as a tool of influence that reinforces donor-driven priorities, with aid often returning to donor countries through conditional loans and procurement requirements (Hickel, 2017). More specifically, ODA has been criticised for prioritising donor countries' economic and political self-interests and perpetuating dependency by imposing Western models of governance that disregard specific local contexts and needs in the Global South (Betts, 2012; Aguinaga et al., 2013; Ziai, 2016; Pal et al., 2023; Onyekachi, 2020; Pal et al., 2023). Aid often requires the procurement of goods and services from the donor country, ensuring that financial aid returns to the donor country through contracts. All in all, these practices result in net losses of several € billion for the poorest countries, despite ODA flows from loans and grants. Tied aid and conditional aid illustrate these dynamics.

The problematic notion of decolonising aid

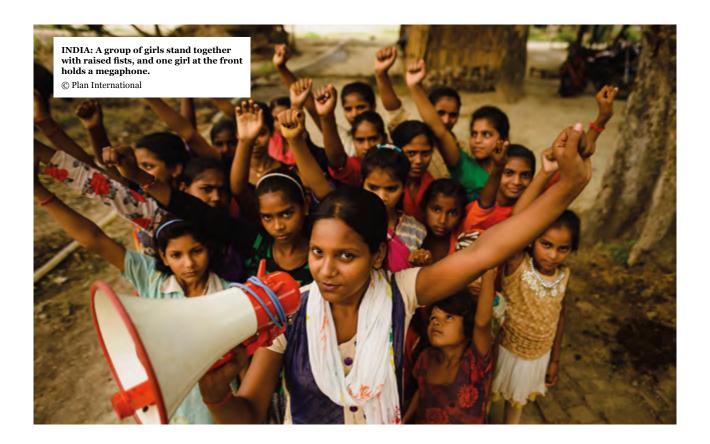
Decolonisation has become a buzzword, yet, we should recall that decolonisation is first and foremost a complex and dynamic process that cannot be easily defined. It has been described by Franz Fanon, a pioneer political philosopher, as a radical, transformative process that dismantles the colonial order to restore autonomy and humanity to the colonised. This process is inherently violent as it involves the complete overthrow of the colonial systems built on violence and oppression.

In such a context, the term "decolonising aid" as we understand it in the conversations that tackle localisation, is often used metaphorically, failing to address the material and structural realities of neoclonial funding systems (Tuck et al., 2012). Yet, at the core of the concept, true decolonisation of the aid sector would require transferring power and funding to Global South-led organisations, completely rethinking Western control over aid priorities and governance, and ending donor-imposed conditions that reinforce dependency. Instead, many aid organisations focus on superficial reforms – such as diversifying staff or adjusting narratives – without redistributing actual decision-making power (Comic Relief, 2023).

In this sense, the paradox of 'decolonising aid' becomes clear: if aid organisations depend on a neocolonial funding system, they cannot achieve genuine decolonisation. As such, it is more realistic to commit to concrete, tangible, actionable steps that reduce and mitigate the harm of colonisation and neocolonialism, than to decolonise the sector or the organisation.

Localisation: a step forward or a new form of control?

Localisation, as outlined in the Grand Bargain (2016), aims to shift decision-making power to local actors. However, progress has been slow: only 1.2% of direct funding reaches Global South CSOs (Development Initiatives, 2023), and many Global South organisations remain financially dependent on Global North intermediaries. While localisation is a step towards equity, it does not fundamentally challenge the global power imbalances embedded in aid structures (Roepstorff, 2019).



3. The way forward for Plan International Belgium

Plan International Belgium is a development and humanitarian organisation firmly rooted in Belgium and in the global aid sector. These two defining characteristics mean that, on the one hand, we are a workplace in Belgium, steeped in its social, political and economic context, and, on the other hand, we are the heirs of a colonial history, some of whose practices persist at all levels. Structurally, our organisation belongs to a sector and a political history rooted in white supremacy and neocolonial structures, despite growing calls for change.

Superficial reforms such as localisation, diversity efforts, and policy adjustments fail to address the root causes of global power imbalances. They are important commitments as a starting point but can easily be seen as a ticking-the-box exercise, maintaining the status quo by avoiding commitment for transformational change.

For aid to move beyond charity and dependency, it must fundamentally shift power, decision-making, and financial control to Global South-led organisations. Pragmatically, if still challenging, it requires, for an organisation like Plan International Belgium, a commitment to dismantling white supremacy and reducing the harm of neocolonialism within the sector, in our workplace and across our governance, programmes, advocacy, marketing, and communication.

We start by outlining critical reflections and positions on anti-racism, localisation and decolonising aid. We then outline our commitments to fostering concrete, radical and transformational change to dismantle white supremacy in our organisation.

In our critical reflections and positions, we are confronted by many paradoxes. Sometimes, our motivations to change internally and to foster transformational change externally can be contradictory to some pragmatic and material choices we make. The most obvious paradox lies with our decision to seek funding from a global sector and system which we critique. Instead of focusing on the risks of such paradoxes, which can be blockers to internal change, or debating that they may be used as arguments against us, we decide to name them, loud and clear.

4. Plan International Belgium's positions

Colonisation is often perceived as a historical phenomenon that concluded in the mid-20th century, yet it continues to persist in various forms today. We challenge the belief that colonisation is a thing of the past.

We acknowledge that colonisation and its impacts persist today, affecting communities around the globe. We stand in solidarity with all people who are still experiencing the realities of colonisation, and we are dedicated to supporting efforts that confront and dismantle these enduring injustices. This means we affirm that we are willing to act in support of them.

By prioritising Global North interests, official development aid perpetuates colonialism.

We recognise that current models of international aid perpetuate colonial ideologies and reinforce global power imbalances. We acknowledge that aid primarily serves the interests of donor countries at the expense of the autonomy and self-determined development of recipient nations.

We recognise that, globally, the current ODA system inherently perpetuates colonial ideologies and reinforces global power imbalances. Reforming International NGOs alone will not resolve structural problems in official development aid.

Civil society organisations receive only 3% of the overall ODA budget and their dependence on donor funding means that aid comes from specific conditions and priorities set by donor governments.

We recognise the limitations of working within the donor-driven ODA system, where our work is constrained by geopolitical priorities. We are committed to using our position of power to advocate for changes within donor frameworks and to pushing for greater flexibility in funding models.

We acknowledge the tension of relying on ODA while critiquing the structures that shape it. We apply for and accept funds that sustain essential programmes even though we recognise that these funds are embedded in a system that sustains colonial power dynamics. This position enables us to advocate from within the system and push for the transformation of its flawed decision-making structures.

We acknowledge that, as a European-based INGO with predominantly Western staff, we hold considerable power, which places us as part of the structural challenges within the aid sector. We are committed to challenging the self-serving nature of aid, and to fostering positive, transformational change within our own national organisation, within the Plan International Federation, and within the aid sector more broadly.

We are committed to working actively to dismantle white supremacy within our own organisation.

'Decolonisation' as a buzzword protects the status quo.

We acknowledge that decolonisation has increasingly been co-opted as a buzzword within the aid sector. We firmly oppose the superficial use of 'decolonisation' and we recognise that decolonisation involves dismantling entrenched colonial power structures, and returning land and resources to Indigenous and colonised peoples. We understand that decolonisation, anti-racism, and feminism are connected yet distinct struggles. Each requires specific approaches and attention to unique forms of power and oppression.

Without such a commitment, the superficial use of 'decolonisation' allows Western aid organisations and institutions, including Plan International Belgium, to maintain relevance without making any substantive changes. The current aid system contradicts the foundational principles of decolonisation; reforms to this aid system do not equate to decolonising the aid system.

We recognise that our knowledge on decolonisation is limited and that continuous learning is essential. We recognise that we need to listen to and learn from scholars, activists, and organisations from the Global South on decolonisation. We especially acknowledge the leadership of people of colour (PoC) in shaping these critical conversations.

"Where is the local?" The dichotomy of international – local is reductive, oversimplifying complex realities in the Global South, leading to a reductive depiction of 'the local'.

We believe the current localisation discourse oversimplifies local dynamics and fails to account for the diversity of CSOs from the Global South. This results in masking the diversity of interests, capacities and levels of influence that 'local' actors hold, and eventually leads to exclusionary practices.

We believe Global North donors and CSOs must go beyond surface-level engagement with Global South CSOs to ensure that marginalised groups and entities, especially grassroots organisations, are meaningfully included in shaping development and humanitarian agendas.

We recognise that effective aid work requires acknowledging the complex power dynamics within communities in the context of intervention, and between Global South and Global North CSOs.

We recognise that framing development as a one-way flow from the North to the South reinforces outdated power dynamics and fails to respect the agency and capacity of Global South CSOs to drive their own development processes.

A top-down decolonisation and localisation ticks the box but doesn't redistribute power.

First, because the discussion on decolonisation and localisation in the aid sector is dominated by Global North CSOs and donors, overshadowing the voices and experiences of those who live in post-colonial or colonised spaces. Also, when Global South perspectives are included, they are often tokenised or instrumentalised to serve the interests of Northern donors. In addition, large, well-established organisations from the Global South tend to sideline grassroot or community-led initiatives, particularly when they represent marginalised groups such as women and girls. The recruitment of elite local individuals in many CSOs, instead of broader community voices, further exacerbates this disconnect. In the case of the localisation agenda specifically, organisations from the Global North retain control over agendas, pushing Global South CSOs to adopt Northern models of development. This creates a paradox where localisation is intended to empower Global South CSOs but ends up reinforcing the dominance of Northern frameworks.

Plan International Belgium recognises that the current discourse on decolonisation and localisation in the aid sector is dominated by Northern institutions, excluding and marginalising the voices of the Global South.

We believe current localisation efforts often reinforce Northern frameworks and fail to empower CSOs from the Global South, maintaining a local-international binary. We also acknowledge that our position as a stakeholder of a broader ODA system may block us from leading transformational change. We recognise this tension and paradox and choose to address it by holding ourselves and our Federation accountable for transformational change in the aid sector.

We acknowledge that decolonisation and localisation require centring the knowledge, agency, and leadership of communities from the Global South, rather than allowing Western narratives to dictate development agendas.

We recognise that donor-imposed conditions and stringent reporting requirements prevent transformational change that ensures the full autonomy of Global South CSOs, thus limiting their ability to develop context-specific solutions.

Global South CSOs are still grossly underfunded under the localisation agenda, despite a well-established rhetoric.

The current funding model disadvantages Global South CSOs, preventing them from accessing direct funding, and perpetuating power imbalance because donor requirements reinforce dependency on indirect funding through Global North intermediaries. Such Global North CSOs also use localisation as a fundraising tool rather than a genuine shift in power dynamics, as they continue to outcompete Global South CSOs for resources.

We recognise the structural inequality in funding distribution, and the need for increased direct, flexible funding to organisations from the Global South, especially feminist, women's rights, girl- and youth-led organisations. We believe that donor policies need to be transformed to offer unconditional, long-term and flexible funding to enable civil society to thrive in the Global South.

We believe that Global North CSOs, including Plan International Belgium, must take on a greater advocacy role, pushing for these changes and rethinking their position in the ODA system to allow for a genuine redistribution of power.

We acknowledge that the localisation agenda cannot succeed without addressing deep-rooted white supremacy in the aid system.

A decolonial feminist lens is essential to challenge racism, patriarchy, and (neo)colonialism.

Plan International Belgium recognises that development narratives shaped by Western feminist frameworks can marginalise the voices and resistance of girls and women in the Global South, reinforcing colonial power structures. We believe that aid should be grounded in decolonial feminist frameworks that centre the voices, knowledge and agency of girls and women in the Global South.

We believe the portrayal of Global South girls and women as economic assets within neoliberal frameworks instrumentalises their labour, overlooking their inherent rights and the deeper systemic oppressions they face. We believe that development and humanitarian efforts must fully integrate an understanding of intersecting oppressions - race, gender, and class - ensuring that solutions address the root causes of inequality in marginalised communities.

We need to move anti-racism work from emotional responses to structural change.

A prevalent issue within the aid sector is the emphasis on individual morality as a solution to racism, which frames racism as the result of personal prejudice or ignorance, rather than understanding it as a systemic issue embedded in the institutional practices of aid organisations. Discourses remain at the level of individual intentions and personal guilt, rather than tackling how white supremacy is embedded in daily practices, decision-making structures, funding allocation, and program implementation.

We recognise that racism in the aid sector is a systemic issue embedded in institutional structures and practices. We acknowledge that, while personal reflection is important, anti-racism efforts must extend beyond individual actions. We believe that building anti-racist organisations requires systemic reforms that redistribute power and decision-making across all levels of the organisation.

We believe the focus must shift from managing white staff's emotional discomfort to taking responsibility for structural change. Creating a space for constructive dialogue is critical, but this must be paired with action that centres the needs and voices of PoC who experience the direct consequences of systemic racism.

We recognise that, ultimately, the goal is to shift focus from individual guilt to collective responsibility. As such, we encourage true allyship within our organisation, that is, recognising one's own power, committing to change organisational systems, listening and encouraging PoC to speak out in a brave space, and supporting initiatives that give real decision-making power to those who are impacted by racism and white supremacy. We invite and encourage allies to advocate for policies and procedures that promote equality, to keep learning about racism and white supremacy, and to be accountable for their commitment to allyship.

5. Our commitments to dismantle white supremacy and promote anti-racist policies

We aim to make clear, impactful changes that address white supremacy in our organisation and our sector, encouraging the continuation of existing practices that currently prove efficient in our organisation, and widening such commitments to be more daring in an organisation committed to anti-racism.

Our commitments are grounded in our organisation's Vision 2036 and structured under five key categories: governance, organisational culture and human resources, programming and partnerships, marketing and communication, and advocacy and influencing.

In terms of **governance**, we commit to redesigning Plan International Belgium's governance structure to represent better our target groups, from the Board of Directors to the Management Team, and Youth Advisory Panel. We commit to institutionalising anti-racism work throughout the organisation and to build pathways to leadership for people of colour.

Regarding our **organisational culture and human resources**, we commit to ensuring equitable recruitment, retention and promotion practices, and to enforcing strict policies against racism, sexism and all forms of discrimination within the organisation. We commit to conducting anti-racism and intersectional feminist training for all staff, governance members and volunteers.

Across our **programmes and partnerships**, we commit to embedding an intersectional feminist approach in all our programming, in Belgium and internationally. We commit to strengthening our accountability to the people we serve and all aligned social movements we partner with. We commit to establishing equitable partnerships with our partner Country Offices and external partners.

On marketing and communication, we commit to presenting the people and the communities we support with dignity and accuracy in all our communications. We commit to amplifying the voices and stories of our partners and the communities we serve.

Regarding our **advocacy and influencing**, we commit our influence within Plan International Federation to reshaping our governance structure and partnership model. We also commit to amplifying the advocacy work of global movements for decolonisation, anti-racism and structural change in the aid sector.



Until every girl is free

Plan International Belgium is an independent Belgian NGO that defends girl's rights and gender equality. We are a member of Plan International. Since 1983, we have been helping children and young people to live more independently. We empower them to decide their own futures. We ensure that girls have the same opportunities as boys from birth: going to school or vocational training, getting a decent job, having a say and making changes in their society, deciding for themselves about their lives and their bodies and developing themselves free from violence.

More information about Plan International Belgium can be found at www.planinternational.be



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