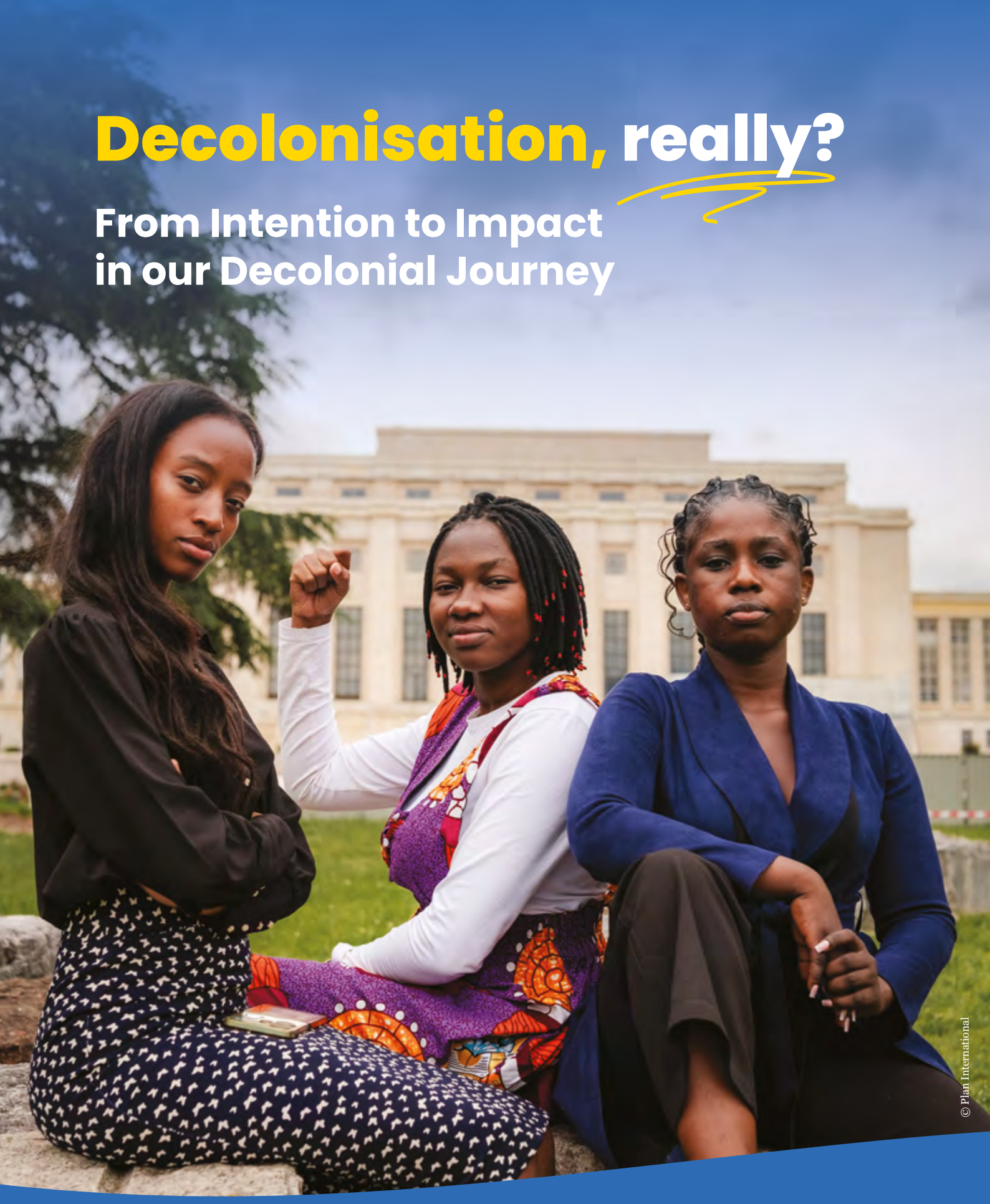
Decolonisation, really?

From Intention to Impact in our Decolonial Journey



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

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PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Until every girl is free

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Foreword

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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

BELGIUM: Plan International Belgium activists celebrating International Day of the Girl 2023.
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1. About Plan International Belgium: a member of the Plan International Federation

Plan International Belgium is a Belgian non-profit and non-governmental organisation that has been striving since 1983 for a world that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We are active worldwide across multiple continents and in Belgium. We work with many allies to empower girls and realise their rights by tackling the root causes of inequalities. Our Vision 2036 is of a world where every girl is free, and her rights are fully realised. It describes our strategic objectives to achieve this mission, one of those strategic objectives being to use our position of privilege to shift power.

To position our organisation in the decolonisation, localisation and anti-racism discussions, we first need to describe the overall environment that we are part of, to outline our spheres of control and influence. We are a legally independent Belgian organisation, part of the Plan International Federation.

Plan International Inc. is a New York-based non-profit corporation. This corporation comprises Plan Limited ('Global Hub,' a wholly-owned subsidiary of Plan International Inc. based in the United Kingdom); country offices (COs); regional hubs (RHs); liaison offices; and other subsidiaries. Global Hub provides executive leadership to Plan International Inc. and corporate and other services to Plan globally. The COs are offices established to deliver programming in the countries in which Plan operates. COs take the lead on programme design, implementation and partnerships in country. Regional Hubs, coordinate and support the work of the COs across the region, and provide regional level strategic leadership. The liaison offices to the UN (Geneva and New York), EU (Brussels) and the African Union (Nairobi) provide a platform to strengthen our influence and relationships with key international, regional, and treaty bodies.

Plan International's 23 national organisations (NOs), including Plan International Belgium, are separate legal entities linked to Plan International Inc. through a membership agreement. They appoint delegates to sit on the Members' Assembly, the highest decision-making authority of Plan International Inc. NOs' role includes managing programmes in various countries (reporting to the donor, financial oversight, dealing with compliance issues, etc); awareness-raising on child poverty and children's rights issues through development education; advocacy for the sustainable fulfilment of children's rights and equality for girls; mobilising private, corporate and public funding for programme work; and managing and contributing to the policy and programme development of Plan International.

2. Introduction

2.1. Background and context

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 broader discourse on racial and social justice, have challenged long-standing power imbalances in aid, development, and governance structures for decades but are at last being 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 **Pledge for Change** on localisation, and commitments to anti-racist principles in aid. Plan International 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 its stance on these interconnected issues, we have developed this position paper on the decolonisation of aid, localisation, and anti-racism in aid.

2.2. Necessary disclaimers

Before diving into the paper, it is important to highlight a few key considerations:

- We recognise the value of a working definition to guide progress, which is provided in section 3 of this position paper. However, what decolonisation and anti-racism mean in one setting may differ significantly in another. Decolonisation in particular does not have a singular definition as it is an unpredictable and often unfinished process shaped by a specific colonial experience (Fanon, 1963; Tuck et al., 2012). As a result, there is a risk of getting caught in endless reflection and discussion trying to land on the perfect definition. Definitions alone do not lead to change: **agreeing on actionable steps to dismantle systems of oppression is more important than rigidly defining terms**.

- **We are using the term 'Global South' in this position paper to refer to economically marginalised and historically colonised nations**. We acknowledge that the term is criticised as it provides a homogenised view of diverse contexts, and reinforces geographic and political binaries (Prys-Hansen, 2023). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this paper, we use 'Global South' as a pragmatic shorthand, while remaining aware of its limitations and the need for critical reflection on its implications.

- **This position paper does not claim to be comprehensive or conclusive**. Rather, it captures the current state of our reflections, based on comprehensive document reviews and internal discussions. It is a living document, open to ongoing learning and adaptation.

- **This position paper confronts our organisation with paradoxes and hard choices to be made**. It highlights how some of our motivations or objectives can be contradictory to pragmatic and material choices we make, and how our motivations and objectives themselves can hold contradiction. Instead of hiding such paradoxes, we decided to acknowledge them and make them visible because this paper marks the start of a longer journey for our organisation to achieve transformational change.

- **We recognise the contradiction in creating this paper as a European-based international non-governmental organization (INGO)**. We are aware that we are taking up space in a discussion that should prioritise the voices of people of colour (PoC) and Global South organisations. However, we believe that articulating our position, both internally and externally, is a necessary step toward meaningful engagement and accountability. We acknowledge that we are not experts, and we are committed to learning from and amplifying the voices of PoC specialists and leaders from the Global South.

How to approach this paper – how to approach discomfort?

We encourage you to approach this position paper with an open mind and a willingness to sit with discomfort. This paper addresses topics that challenge deeply embedded ideas about power, privilege, and justice in the aid sector. As such, some readers may experience discomfort, defensiveness, or even resistance while engaging with these reflections. If you feel unsettled while reading, we encourage you to pause and reflect on why you are feeling this discomfort. Ask yourself: 'What, specifically, is making me uncomfortable? And why?', 'Am I feeling defensive, and if so, why?' 'Am I prioritising my own feelings over the realities of injustice being discussed?' 'How can I shift from defensiveness to accountability and curiosity?' Discomfort is part of unlearning, as white supremacy and colonialism persist not just through structures, but through emotional attachments to the status quo. We invite you to see this paper as an opportunity for growth and collective transformation.

Plan International developed a comprehensive training package regarding **Power, Privilege and Bias**. If you are working for Plan International, you can access the online training via Plan Academy. We strongly recommend you complete the training before engaging with this paper. If you are not working for Plan International, we recommend exploring other resources about power, privilege and bias.

2.3. Methodology

In developing this position paper, we used a feminist lens throughout our analysis, which aligns with Plan International's commitment to gender equality and feminist leadership. This approach reflects our belief that the struggle for decolonisation and anti-racism cannot be separated from the struggle for gender justice. By using a feminist analysis, we are acknowledging the intersectionality of race, gender, and colonial histories in shaping inequalities in the aid sector. We deliberately centred the perspectives and scholarship of PoC – particularly women – in our literature review, rather than defaulting to mainstream or predominantly Western perspectives that often dominate the discourse in the aid sector. We believe that PoC women's leadership and perspectives are essential to driving meaningful change in the global aid system. Our feminist lens informs our critique of the existing aid structures and our proposed pathways for transformation and organisational commitments.

Our methodology for this paper involved a review of over 100 peer-reviewed articles and grey literature materials. A core working group, representing different departments of our organisation, was formed to identify key commitments. The position paper was further reviewed by specialists within the Plan International Federation, including from Global Hub and COs, and by external experts in Belgium.

2.4. How to navigate this paper

This paper is organised to provide a thorough understanding of the complex issues surrounding decolonisation, localisation, and anti-racism in the aid sector, starting from foundational concepts and moving towards Plan International Belgium's critical reflections, positions and commitments.

Section 3 Key concepts

This section covers the foundational ideas that shape the conversation on decolonisation, localisation, and anti-racism in the aid sector. It defines colonisation and neocolonisation, examining how they shape power dynamics in the aid sector. **Racism** and **white supremacy** are examined as systems of oppression created by colonialism that uphold the dominance of white, Western actors in the aid sector. **Decolonisation is then introduced, addressing the paradoxes inherent in trying to 'decolonise aid'**. Finally, we cover the topic of **localisation**, making a clear distinction in definitions and ambitions towards decolonisation. We draw a link with feminist struggle throughout the section. This section provides a foundation and framework for the rest of the position paper. It is particularly helpful for readers who are new to these topics, and also those who are interested in engaging more critically with these concepts.

Section 4 Critical reflections and positions

This section moves from theory to practice, outlining our reflections on important issues linked to mainstream approaches to decolonisation, localisation, and anti-racism in the aid sector. It articulates our position on these issues. These reflections and positions build on the analyses discussed in the key concepts section and form the basis for our commitments.

Section 5 Plan International Belgium's commitments

Recognising the paradoxes and constraints inherent to decolonising aid, this section outlines our commitments to addressing **white supremacy** and adopting inclusive governance and practices in alignment with our intersectional feminist principles and values. These commitments are designed to be accountable to our staff, partners, and the communities we work with.

To read this position paper, we invite you to choose the approach that best suits your familiarity with the topics, your level of interest and your available time:

For a quick overview: Start with the management summary for a straightforward summary of the key points.

If you're already familiar with these topics and want to know our positions and commitments: Go directly to section 4 and section 5, which detail our stance and planned actions.

For a deep dive: Begin with section 3 to understand the foundational ideas, especially to understand how colonialism and neocolonialism, racism, white supremacy, decolonisation, localisation, and feminism are interwoven within the aid sector and how these dynamics inform Plan International's commitments and actions.

ECUADOR: a group of Girls Get Equal youth activists sitting on stairs and looking at the camera with determination.

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3. Key concepts

3.1. Racism, white supremacy, and aid

3.1.1. White supremacy and colonialism shape contemporary racism

Racism refers to a system of oppression that privileges one racial group over others, manifesting through social, economic, and institutional policies and practices. It is not just about individual prejudice but about how entire systems and structures work to perpetuate inequality based on race (Racial Equity Tools, 2021).

White supremacy provides the ideological foundation for racism, allowing systems of privilege and oppression to continue within society. **White supremacy is not limited to overt hate groups; it is deeply embedded in societal structures that normalise the dominance of white people and marginalise PoC**. White supremacy is a system of beliefs and practices where whiteness is positioned as the norm, superior to other racial identities, and central to power, prestige, and decision-making across societies and institutions (Srivastava, 2005; COFEM, 2021). White supremacy operates by maintaining and reinforcing power structures that privilege white individuals, while marginalising and oppressing people who are not white, shaping cultural beliefs and institutional policies that perpetuate inequality (Racial Equity Tools, 2021). This hierarchy justifies the unequal distribution of power and resources, privileging white people in various domains such as education, employment, and political representation (DiAngelo, 2018).

At its core, racism is the operationalisation of white supremacy.

Although forms of ethnocentrism, culture and lineage-based discrimination and other forms of conceptualising 'otherness' existed in ancient civilisations, the concept of racism as we know it today was shaped during the European colonial expansion starting in the 15th century (Seth, 2020). Colonialism institutionalised racism to justify the subjugation and exploitation of colonised peoples (Bonilla-Silva, 2007). White supremacist ideologies framed colonised populations as biologically and culturally inferior, rationalising territorial expansion, resource extraction, systemic violence and the erasure of Indigenous cultures and histories (Tuck et al., 2012). This ideology was supported by practices such as slavery, segregation, genocide, forced labour and state-sanctioned violence, and oppression, creating enduring structures of racial inequality that are still upheld.

Historically, categorising people based on race has been a highly political act, closely tied to practices such as colonisation, slavery, segregation, inheritance rights, forced labour, and colonial labour migration, indentured labour, and more recently, the colonial and neocolonial labour migration (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Coello de la Rosa et al, 2000). These practices were foundational to the establishment of modern global economies, which continue to privilege whiteness.

In contemporary societies, racism remains a pervasive issue, shaping lives and opportunities for PoC. White supremacy, while less overt today, continues to operate through systemic racism, economic disenfranchisement, and political exclusion (Fanon, 1963; Tuck et al., 2012). The disproportionate incarceration rates, police brutality, and economic disparities experienced by PoC are not anomalies but outcomes of long-standing systems that benefit white populations (Crenshaw, 1989).

3.1.2. Belgium's colour-blind reality

Racism in Europe is deeply tied to its history of colonialism, which relied on pseudo-scientific racial hierarchies to justify the exploitation and domination of non-European peoples. Belgium's colonial history, especially in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, epitomises the violence and systemic inequalities wrought by these ideologies (Destrooper, 2022; Azabar et al., 2023). These colonial systems were deeply racialised, categorising people based on perceived race superiority and embedding white supremacy into the fabric of European societies (Azabar et al., 2023).

The taboo of race in Belgium

A significant barrier to addressing racism in Belgium,[1] is the denial of its existence. Race is a taboo subject. This stems from colonial amnesia and post-Holocaust societal guilt, rejecting racial categorisation to avoid invoking past atrocities. This has led to a widespread belief in a 'post-racial' society in Belgium and Europe more generally, further solidified by the adoption of colour-blind ideologies (Baruti, 2021; Essed et al. 2019; Salem et al., 2016; Gouppy, 2024). Colour-blindness rejects the use of racial categories, claiming that race is irrelevant in a supposedly egalitarian society (Sayyid, 2017; Gouppy, 2024; Simon, 2019). This perspective perpetuates the idea that racial inequality is a relic of the past, and leads to silencing conversations about systemic racism. It avoids the acknowledgement of race as a social category that impacts the daily lives of racialised people (or PoC) in our contemporary society.

The term 'race' is replaced by euphemisms like 'diversity', 'ethnic background', 'migration background', *'jeunes de quartier'* (youth from certain neighbourhoods), *'allochtonen'* (non-natives) or *'anderstaligen'* (other-linguals). These terms are used in Belgium to discuss racialised groups without directly addressing race, effectively masking racial systemic inequalities under cultural or linguistic differences (Ceuppens, 2006; Kanobana, 2021; Zemni, 2011; Gouppy, 2024; Simon, 2019). Discussions on racism are therefore often reframed as debates about 'migration' or 'integration' or 'multiculturalism', perpetuating the idea that racialised individuals, even second- and third-generation Belgians, remain outsiders. It also frames the problems faced by PoC as a failure to integrate or as isolated incidents linked to individual acts, despite evidence that many challenges faced by racialised individuals stem from systemic racism. Ultimately, these euphemisms confuse who and what we are actually talking about, opening space for ambiguity that shifts the focus away from racism.

At Plan International Belgium, this avoidance is palpable when trying to initiate conversations about anti-racism. Staff often avoid naming race altogether, opting instead for euphemisms like 'inclusion' or 'diversity'. This broadens discussions to encompass issues such as LGBTQI+ rights, disability, or poverty, which, while important, can dilute the focus on racism. This lack of specificity hinders the organisation's ability to address racial inequalities effectively, leaving discussions vague and preventing the development of concrete anti-racism actions.

Institutionalised colour-blindness

The avoidance of race is not just cultural; it is also institutionalised (Unia, 2022; Gouppy, 2024). The Belgian government has consistently rejected calls for collecting disaggregated data on racial or ethnic origin, arguing it would violate principles of neutrality and privacy (CERD, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021). However, the refusal to collect disaggregated data means the impact of systemic racism on various groups is not adequately measured, limiting the effectiveness of anti-discrimination policies.

Efforts to combat racism have been slow and inconsistent. Since the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, Belgian authorities have pledged to develop a national action plan against racism. Yet, as of 2025, no such plan has been implemented. Although initiatives like the 2020 Inter-Ministerial Conference Against Racism were established, progress remains limited, leaving Belgium without a cohesive framework to tackle systemic racism (CERD, 2021).

1 This paper refers here to the sociological definition of racism and not its legal implication.

In law enforcement, discussions of police brutality often avoid addressing racial profiling and instead frame incidents as isolated or procedural issues (CERD, 2021; Unia, 2022). Yet, racial profiling is a persistent issue, with 41% of people of African descent reporting police stops on the street, and 31% describing their treatment as disrespectful (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). This systemic targeting reinforces mistrust between racialised communities and law enforcement (Amnesty International, 2021).

Public controversies such as the persistence of colonial-era statues, including those of King Leopold II, or the annual tradition of *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete), are downplayed as debates over historical memory or cultural significance rather than symbols of ongoing racial inequality (Azabar et al., 2023; Rutazibwa, 2017; Gouppy, 2024). These practices contribute to a broader culture of denial, where racism is acknowledged only in extreme cases, such as hate crimes, but not as a pervasive and systemic problem shaping racial inequalities in housing, employment, education or access to justice.

Prevalence of systemic racism in Belgium

Studies consistently show how racism is prevalent in Belgium, despite the existence of a legal framework prohibiting discrimination based on racial characteristics.[2]

Systemic racism affects various aspects of life for racialised communities, particularly people of African descent and Muslim populations. Nearly 50% of individuals of African descent face racial discrimination when trying to rent or buy housing; and 33% work under temporary contracts, compared to 7% for the general population. Economic inequality is stark, with 33% of people of African descent struggling to make ends meet compared to 14% of the general population (Unia, 2022; Fundamental Rights Research Centre, 2022). Workplace discrimination is a significant challenge for racialised communities in Belgium. A study by Sankaa vzw found that workplaces are the most common sites of discrimination (23%), followed by public spaces (21%) and educational institutions (17%). Women are more likely to face discrimination at work, while men encounter it predominantly in public spaces such as streets and public transport. Both men and women reported that these experiences of discrimination impacted their career and education choices (Sankaa vzw, 2023).

Women, particularly those aged 16-34, are more likely to experience racist harassment, highlighting the intersection of racism and gender-based discrimination (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). Muslim women, particularly those who wear headscarves, face additional layers of discrimination across multiple domains including education, employment, access to public services, and exposure to hate crimes (ENAR, 2016). These systemic barriers are compounded by a lack of accessible avenues for reporting discrimination, leaving many victims without recourse or support (Fundamental Rights Research Centre, 2022).

The systematic denial of racism in Belgium influences how racialised individuals perceive and respond to discrimination. Over two-thirds of racial discrimination cases surveyed in a study conducted by Sankaa go unreported due to feelings of helplessness and scepticism about institutional support (Sankaa vzw, 2023). The lack of racial discourse in public policy reinforces this silence, creating a cycle where systemic issues remain hidden and unaddressed (Fundamental Rights Research Centre, 2022).

As we turn to examine racism in the aid sector, it is important to consider how these patterns of exclusion and inequality manifest in international development and humanitarian work within Belgian organisations. The same systemic biases that shape domestic policies often influence Belgium's role on the global stage (Rutazibwa, 2017 & 2019).

2 The 1981 anti-racism law; the 2007 anti-discrimination law; the ratification of the UN Convention of December 1965 on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, and the European "Race" Directive 2000/43/3G of June 2000.

3.1.3. White supremacy and racism in the global aid sector

White supremacy is deeply embedded in the structure of the aid sector. It influences who holds power, whose voices are prioritised, and whose expertise is valued. Despite increasing discourse on anti-racism and localisation, the sector remains dominated by white-led organisations and Western perspectives (Roepstorff, 2019; Crewe et al., 2006). White supremacy in this context manifests through the predominance of white leadership in decision-making processes, the prioritisation of Western funding and development models, and the marginalisation of expertise from the Global South.

White leadership and western expertise

One of the most visible manifestations of white supremacy in the aid sector is the predominance of white leadership in decision-making processes. INGOs, institutions and donors from the Global North remain led by white people from the Global North, even when their work is primarily in non-white majority regions. This leadership structure gives white actors disproportionate influence over programme priorities and resource allocation, often sidelining leaders of colour and of the Global South from meaningful roles in strategic decisions (Roepstorff, 2019; House of Commons, 2022; Betts, 2021; COFEM, 2021).

Standards of professionalism are often based on white, Western norms, which can disadvantage PoC and people of the Global South, and limit their hiring and promotion opportunities in aid organisations (Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2019). PoC and people of the Global South often face systemic biases and a lack of support for professional growth, contributing to their underrepresentation in leadership positions (House of Commons, 2022). This trend is further maintained through informal networks and social norms that privilege white migrants (often referred to as 'expatriates') over staff of colour and of the Global South, limiting the influence of local perspectives and reinforcing racialised hierarchies within aid organisations (Crewe et al., 2006).

Although there have been efforts to improve representation in leadership, advisory, and technical roles in the aid sector, true shifts in power and authority remain elusive. Leaders and experts from the Global South are sometimes invited to participate in international forums or projects, but their involvement remains largely symbolic, offering them little substantive decision-making power. This tokenistic inclusion reinforces the dominance of white-led organisations and the perception that voices and knowledge from the Global South are secondary to Western expertise (Tuck et al., 2012; House of Commons, 2022; Roepstorff, 2019; Crewe, 2006).

Western development models

Aid systematically erases or devaluates knowledge and ways of being from the Global South in favour of Western frameworks of understanding and problem-solving. This dynamic obscures the historical impacts of colonialism and represents the Global South as inherently dependent on external aid, while ignoring how colonialism created these conditions (Spivak, 1998; Kapoor, 2004).

Organisations from the Global South are rarely granted the autonomy to lead initiatives that impact their own communities, with their roles often limited to the implementation of externally designed programmes. White Western norms frequently serve as benchmarks for success in aid programmes, defining the types of services provided. This imposition of external values and solutions frequently fails to consider local cultural contexts, reinforcing the superiority of Western approaches over Global South knowledge and resulting in interventions that do not align with the needs and realities of the communities they are meant to serve. (Beck, 2021; Betts, 2021; COFEM, 2021; Roepstorff, 2019).

Capacity-building programmes reflect Western models of organisational management, financial reporting, and project design, leaving little room for adaptation to local practices or contexts. These programmes suggest that organisations from the Global South need 'fixing' to meet donor-imposed standards, rather than recognising their existing strengths and expertise and the need to reform rigid donor frameworks (Roepstorff, 2019; Beck, 2021; Onyekachi, 2020). A common example is the emphasis on monitoring and evaluation frameworks, which are often designed by donors or organisations in the Global North and require civil society organisations[3] (CSOs) from the Global South to adopt rigid, technical indicators that do not align with their cultural or contextual realities. For instance, qualitative storytelling methods used by Indigenous communities to evaluate success may be dismissed in favour of quantitative metrics like standardised outcome measures.

3 UNDP. NGOs and CSOs: a note on terminology

Furthermore, Western trainers are frequently positioned as experts in capacity-building efforts, reinforcing the narrative that knowledge flows only from the Global North to the Global South. This creates an environment where organisations from the Global South are forced to conform to systems that do not reflect their lived realities, further entrenching dependency on external support (Roepstorff, 2019; House of Commons, 2022).

Romanticisation of 'local' solutions and identities

Mainstream aid discourse romanticises ethnic identities within affected populations, presenting them as unchanging and homogeneous. This essentialisation is rooted in racist and white supremacist perspectives that frame communities in the Global South as primitive or 'exotic others'. It masks internal diversities and silences the voices of those who challenge dominant cultural or social norms (Spivak, 1988; Kapoor, 2004).

While there has been increasing focus on 'local' solutions and community-based approaches in aid discourse, these efforts are often undermined by their romanticisation. Romanticising 'local' solutions can oversimplify the complexities of local contexts, reducing them to static, idealised representations that fail to account for internal power dynamics and inequalities (Roepstorff et al., 2020; Kapoor, 2004). As a result, 'the local' is often framed as inherently harmonious, homogeneous, and capable of addressing all developmental challenges without acknowledging the structural inequalities and conflicts that exist within communities.

Aid projects frequently depict 'the local' as a singular entity, disregarding variations in gender, class, ethnicity, and political affiliations that shape individual and group experiences. This oversimplification ignores critical questions, such as: Where is the local? Who represents the local? and whether empowering certain elites may inadvertently reinforce patriarchal and oppressive structures (Kapoor, 2004; Crewe et al., 2006; Roepstorff, 2019).

The romanticisation of 'local' identities often fails to interrogate the intersection of power and privilege within communities. Localisation efforts led by white and Western organisations frequently fail to consider these dynamics, sometimes creating scenarios where 'local' elites gain authority while marginalised groups are further excluded (Roche et al., 2020; Roepstorff et al., 2020).

White saviour narrative

The portrayal of Global South communities in aid communications often relies on racialised and reductionist stereotypes, depicting them through a lens of helplessness, poverty, and backwardness. These representations frame individuals and societies in the Global South as dependent on the benevolence of the Global North, stripping them of their agency and dignity (Pailey, 2019; Kapoor, 2004). Such depictions reinforce paternalistic views of the Global South and uphold systemic inequalities between donors and recipients, perpetuating global hierarchies rooted in white supremacy.

At the heart of these representations is the 'white saviour' narrative, which positions Western actors – white individuals or organisations – as the heroic rescuers of people in the Global South. This narrative constructs a binary in which the Global North is portrayed as capable, knowledgeable, and altruistic, while the Global South is characterised as passive, ignorant, and incapable of addressing its own challenges (Khan, 2021; Roche et al, 2020; COFEM, 2021; Tuck et al., 2012; Kalpana, 2015).

The reliance on stereotypes disempowers Global South communities and shapes donor perceptions and funding priorities in ways that reinforce existing power imbalances. When aid narratives depict the Global South as uniformly impoverished and in need of saving, they prioritise interventions that align with these racialised imaginaries rather than addressing systemic issues such as wealth inequality, land dispossession, and global trade injustices (Srivastava, 2005; COFEM, 2021).

Moreover, these portrayals fail to acknowledge the agency, resilience, and expertise within Global South communities. They erase the critical work of Global South leaders, activists, and organisations who actively confront the root causes of inequality (such as neocolonialism and extractive neoliberal policies) while advancing systemic solutions to poverty and global economic injustice (Fungai, 2020; Roche et al., 2020). This erasure is particularly harmful in contexts where communities are already struggling to have their voices heard in international development discourse.

Case study

CAMBODIA: A group of girls in school uniform sitting on the floor holding a book and smiling at the camera.
© Plan International

Plan International's child sponsorship model

One of Plan International's most prominent fundraising mechanisms is the child sponsorship model, where individual donors sponsor a specific child, providing financial support intended to improve the living conditions of a child and their community. This sponsorship model has been critiqued both by Plan International staff and external stakeholders for reinforcing colonial and white saviour dynamics.

Child sponsorship programmes replicate colonial power structures by positioning Western donors as saviours while presenting children from the Global South as passive recipients of aid (Nolan, 2020; Jefferess, 2008; Rabbitts, 2013). This dynamic perpetuates the white saviour trope, where donors feel a sense of moral superiority and control over the children they sponsor, reinforcing racial and economic hierarchies (Gurbin, 2013). The sponsorship model creates an implicit hierarchy, where donors feel they have a vested interest and stake in the future of these children (Nolan, 2020). This reinforces racialised understandings of poverty that align with colonial myths, decontextualising the historical and systemic causes of poverty and reducing it to an individual problem (Gurbin, 2013).

Donors' financial contributions place them in a position of power over the child's well-being. While donors may not directly control specific decisions in the child's life, their monetary influence means that withdrawing funds can significantly impact the child's access to essential resources and services. This dynamic establishes an indirect form of control, as the child's continued support depends on how the sponsorship relationship is meeting the donor's expectations.

Child sponsorship commodifies children's experiences. In exchange for their donation, donors are provided with regular updates, letters, and pictures from the sponsored child. These personalised updates contribute to the commodification of poverty, turning children and their struggles into consumable narratives for the donor's emotional satisfaction (Jefferess, 2008). Visits to the sponsored child's community, while intended to foster deeper connections, often reinforce the sense of ownership that donors feel over the child's progress, presenting the child's life and community as a product for the donor's experience (Rabbitts, 2013).

While Plan International is currently rethinking the child sponsorship model, questions remain about how we can fully deconstruct these colonial legacies and move toward more equitable, community-led development models while maintaining stable funding sources.

3.2. Aid, colonialism and neocolonialism

3.2.1. What is colonialism?

Proposed definition:

Colonialism is a system of domination in which a nation extends its sovereignty over another one, resulting in the subjugation and exploitation of Indigenous and colonised populations[4]. This practice involves the exertion of political, economic, and cultural dominance by the colonising power, including the establishment of settlements in some cases.

Colonisation is the action of settling a colony and establishing control over a territory and its people Historically, colonisation set up new political and legal systems that served the interests of the colonising power. Those subjected to colonisation endured exploitation, violence, and dispossession of land and resources (Fanon, 1963; Tuck et al., 2012).

Beyond physical domination, colonisers exerted control over the cultural and social fabric of colonised societies by imposing their language, ideologies, religion, and social structures. This led to a profound alteration of Indigenous and colonised identities and cultures, inflicting lasting psychological and socio-cultural harm. The impacts of this cultural erasure and identity suppression persist today, shaping the lived realities of many Indigenous and colonised communities (Fanon, 1963; Tuck et al., 2012).

Furthermore, colonialism imposed patriarchal and racial hierarchies, marginalising Indigenous and colonised women (Lugones, 2007; Mohanty, 2003). Colonial powers often justified their interventions by portraying Indigenous women as victims of 'barbaric' practices, needing rescue by European men. This narrative, critiqued as "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988), disregarded the agency of Indigenous and colonised women and intensified patriarchal structures within colonised societies. These dynamics further disrupted pre-colonial forms of gender equity and Indigenous governance systems.

Colonisation did not end in the past, it is a process underpinned by an ongoing structure of domination. It continues to displace Indigenous and colonised peoples, secure land, resources, and power for settlers, and perpetuate systems of inequality deeply rooted in colonial ideologies (Tuck et al., 2012).

Operative modes of colonialism:

There are various ways in which colonialism has exerted control over colonised peoples, some of which are outlined below:

- **Settler colonialism:** Here, the coloniser comes to stay, and the primary goal is to permanently occupy and exploit the land and resources. This results in the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous populations. Settler colonialism seeks to erase Indigenous existence while normalising the presence and control of the colonisers. Contrary to popular belief, settler colonialism is still ongoing. According to the United Nations, there are 17 territories that still have not gained independence from colonisers (United Nations, 2024). This list does not include Palestine and other territories where the Indigenous populations continue to fight for sovereignty and land return (OHCHR, 2022; ICJ, 2024).

4 When referring to Indigenous peoples in this paper, we are using the definition set by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), which identifies Indigenous peoples as: (i) descendants of the original inhabitants of a region before colonisation; (ii) communities with distinct social, economic, and cultural systems tied to their ancestral lands and resources; and (iii) groups that self-identify as Indigenous and are recognised as such by their communities. We also use the term 'colonised peoples' to include all groups, beyond land-based communities, subjugated by colonial powers, such as enslaved, migrants, displaced, and mixed-race populations. In brief, Indigenous populations are those native to a land; and colonised populations are those subjected to colonial rule, which may include non-Indigenous groups. Both terms are necessary to address the full scope of colonial violence. Using both ensures that specific and intersecting struggles are not erased.

- **Violence and control:** Colonisation is inherently violent, involving the physical and cultural subjugation of Indigenous and colonised populations. The use of violence including military force, slavery, exploitation, sexual violence, kidnapping and institutionalisation of children, and genocide has been a key feature of colonisation. The transatlantic slave trade, plantation systems, forced removal of Indigenous and mixed-race children and the violent repression of Indigenous resistance across continents illustrates this. In the case of Belgium's colonisation of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Belgian colonists weaponised sexual violence as a deliberate tool of racial and colonial dominance. Sexual violence, including rape, abduction, forced incest, damaging women's and girls' reproductive organs, and public sexual assaults, was used to inflict psychological terror and trauma, enforce obedience, and degrade and dehumanise the Congolese population (Fabricius, 2024). Extreme brutality also marked the extraction of resources: the colonised population was coerced into working under threat of violence. To force men to work on rubber plantations, entire villages were burned, women and girls were raped, and women and children were kidnapped (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012; Fabricius, 2024). Those who failed to meet rubber quotas had their wives or children raped or mutilated, with severed hands becoming a symbol of colonial terror (Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, 2024; Fabricius, 2024).

- **Erasure and assimilation:** Colonisation aims to erase Indigenous cultures and identities. This is done through forced assimilation, compelling Indigenous people to adopt the colonisers' language, religion, and social norms. For example, European missionaries played a significant role in spreading Christianity, often in conjunction with colonial administration (Said, 1978). Schools run by missionaries were instrumental in this cultural erasure, as children were taught to adopt European languages and values, with little recognition of local traditions, ways of knowing or languages (Tuck et al., 2012). Indigenous and mixed-raced children were also forcibly removed from their families and placed into state-run institutions, churches or white families, where they suffered alienation, violence, abuse and, in some cases, forced labour (Ekin, 2021; Cunneen, 2010; Morais Soares, 2024). This erasure and assimilation created a long-term psychological impact on the colonised, notably internalised feelings of inferiority and alienation (Fanon, 1963).

- **Exploitation of resources:** Colonisation aimed to extract resources, often using forced labour, such as in plantations or mines, creating wealth for the colonisers while impoverishing Indigenous communities. Colonial economies relied heavily on racialised and gendered labour systems, exploiting Indigenous women through forced servitude, agricultural work, and sexual exploitation. The legacy of this exploitation is embedded in today's capitalist economies, where intersections of race, class, and gender continue to shape global labour dynamics, relying on the unpaid and undervalued labour of women of colour in the Global South(Federici, 2004).

- **Expropriation of land:** the establishment of settlements and extraction of resources happened in conjunction with the expropriation of Indigenous land. Colonising powers saw the land as theirs, justifying this by racist ideologies that depicted Indigenous peoples as 'primitive' or 'inferior.' For example, in the DRC, Belgium seized land for rubber and mineral extraction, displacing Indigenous populations (Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, 2024). Similarly, in South Africa, European settlers appropriated vast tracts of land, enforcing segregation laws that restricted Black ownership (SAHO, 2022). Indigenous peoples across the globe continue to struggle for land rights and sovereignty, especially in regions where mining, agriculture, and tourism industries persist under foreign control.

- **Divide and rule:** Colonial powers strategically sowed divisions within colonised societies, frequently along ethnic, tribal, or socio-economic lines, to weaken resistance and maintain control. By privileging one group above others and granting it limited privileges and authority, colonial powers could create loyal intermediaries who helped them maintain dominance while suppressing unity among the colonised population. This tactic undermined solidarity among colonised populations, and entrenched internal divisions that sometimes escalated into enduring conflicts after independence. For example, in Rwanda, Belgian colonial administrators categorised and favoured Tutsis over Hutus, which heightened ethnic tensions that later fuelled the 1994 genocide (Braeckman, 2021).

3.2.2. What is neocolonialism?

Coined by former President of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah in 1963, 'neocolonialism' refers to how former colonial powers maintain indirect control over former colonies via finance, culture, and politics. This includes debt, cultural imperialism, and international development aid (Betts, 2012; Aguinaga et al., 2013; Ziai, 2016; Pal et al., 2023; Onyekachi, 2020). Multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and global governance institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations, all play roles in sustaining neocolonial relationships between the Global North and the Global South.

Colonial dynamics persist through mechanisms that uphold the economic and psychological dependency of formerly colonised peoples despite nominal independence. In this section, we examine some ways this dependency is maintained.

Operative mechanisms of neocolonialism:

- **Cultural imperialism and knowledge domination:** Neocolonialism manifests through cultural imperialism, where the Global North's cultural norms, languages, art, and systems of knowledge are privileged over the Global South's, often leading to the erosion or marginalisation of Global South cultures and traditions. Many scholars have documented how Western scholarship and media have historically constructed the Global South as the exotic and inferior 'other' or third world 'subaltern' (Said, 1978; Kapoor, 2004). These depictions serve to justify and maintain Western dominance by perpetuating stereotypes of Global South societies as backward or uncivilised, thus in need of Western interventions for modernisation and process. In international development, education and global media, knowledge from the Global North tends to be positioned as superior, marginalising Indigenous knowledge systems and Global South expertise. This creates a sense of cultural inferiority among formerly colonised peoples, reinforcing the neocolonial power dynamic (Pal et al., 2023; Said, 1978).

- **Political and military interventions:** Neocolonial powers maintain influence by supporting regimes that align with their economic and political interests, sometimes resorting to direct political or military interventions. These actions can escalate to severe violence, such as Belgium's role in the torture and assassination of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba in 1961 (Chotiner, 2023). Former colonial powers continue to interfere in the political affairs of their former colonies to safeguard their own interests.

- **Economic dependency and conditional aid:** One of the primary mechanisms of neocolonialism is continued economic dependency, reinforced through unequal trade agreement and conditional aid that favour donor nations. Former colonial powers maintain control over key resource extraction industries; and former colonies are compelled to export raw materials at low prices while importing expensive finished goods from the Global North, which limits their capacity to industrialise and diversify their own economies. This structure mirrors colonial economic exploitation and prevents developing nations from building local industries and markets. Former colonial powers use their economic influence to dominate resource extraction industries such as mining, agriculture, and energy production (Betts, 2012; Aguinaga et al., 2013; Ziai, 2016; Pal et al., 2023; Onyekachi, 2020). For example, after gaining independence in 1960, the DRC remained dependent on Belgian expertise and foreign companies for the extraction of its rich natural resources. The country's reliance on foreign corporations for mining and other industries resulted in European and American powers continuing to profit from Congo's natural wealth (Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, 2024).

Additionally, development loans and aid frequently come with strict conditions that benefit donor countries more than recipients. These conditions often require recipient nations to adopt neoliberal economic policies, such as privatisation of state enterprises, deregulation of markets, and cuts to public spending, in return for financial assistance. While these policies are framed as promoting economic stability, they deepen inequality, increase poverty, and undermine public services like education and healthcare (Escobar, 2012; Ziai, 2016).

3.2.3. Aid and neocolonialism

From civilising missions to development missions:

As we began to explore in the previous section, 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. In the 19th century, colonial powers justified their domination of vast territories across Africa, Asia, and Latin America under the guise of a 'civilising mission'. This mission, framed as a moral obligation to uplift 'backward' societies, was often supported by early forms of humanitarian aid. Aid efforts served dual purposes: to legitimise colonial rule and to mitigate the adverse effects of colonial exploitation (Betts, 2020; Ziai, 2016). Thus, aid was 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).

The post-second world war period coincided with the decolonisation process, as former colonies gained independence. Yet, the withdrawal of colonial powers did not mark the end of their influence. Instead, official development aid (ODA) became part of a new form of control, where donor countries used aid to exert economic and political influence over newly independent states (Ziai, 2016). Although the rhetoric shifted from 'civilising' to 'promoting development', the underlying narrative remained: **colonised people, once depicted as static and inferior, were now viewed as capable of improvement through Western-led development interventions aimed at poverty reduction, economic growth, and education**. This reframing of dominance as benevolent aid perpetuates the imposition of Western norms as universal standards (Ziai, 2016; Betts, 2012; Aguinaga et al., 2013).

The discourse empowers a new class of experts and institutions (e.g., World Bank, IMF) who claim technical expertise in managing development, echoing the colonial administrations' reliance on 'experts' to manage colonies (Ziai, 2016). These technical experts often speak for Global South people instead of listening to them (Kapoor, 2004). They promote Western models and standards as if they were universal. In doing so, they erase Global South knowledge and experience and stifle Global South leadership in shaping their own futures.

Self-serving ODA:

In addition to the inherent power hierarchies, 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).

Bilateral aid agencies often influence the political and economic policies of recipient countries, favouring projects that align with their own foreign policy objectives rather than the diversity of needs in the Global South. In many cases, aid requires the procurement of goods and services from the donor country, ensuring that much of the financial aid returns to the donor through contracts, benefitting their industries while limiting the recipient's autonomy (Pal et al., 2023; Hickel, 2017;). These practices resulted in a net loss of USD 41.3 billion for Africa in 2015, with USD 161.6 billion received mainly through ODA (loans and grants) and remittances; and USD 202.9 billion extracted from Africa, mainly through debt; and multinationals repatriating profits and illegally moving money out (Curtis et al, 2017).

Two specific types of ODA highlight these dynamics:

- **Tied aid** requires recipients to purchase goods and services from the donor country. This makes projects more expensive and limits the ability of recipients to choose cheaper or locally appropriate options. It strengthens the donor's economy while weakening the recipient's independence and local markets.

- **Conditional aid** requires recipients to implement specific political, social or economic reforms that often benefit the donor. Structural adjustment programmes from the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s, for instance, required countries to liberalise trade, privatise industries, and cut public spending. This led to increased inequality and poverty (Ziai, 2016). In Mali, the World Bank demanded the privatisation of the cotton industry as a condition for continued aid, despite strong local opposition (Glennie, 2011). Such conditions weaken national sovereignty and limit countries' control over their own policies.

As governments withdrew from providing social services under structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s, CSOs stepped in to fill the gap. This period saw a rise in Global North CSOs and Global South CSOs, many of which unintentionally promoted neoliberal agendas by legitimising the withdrawal of state responsibility. They helped spread the belief that private organisations are better than governments at providing basic services (Manji et al., 2002; INCITE!, 2007).

In that context, an additional power dynamic emerged. CSOs from the Global North often had greater access to resources, expertise, and influence with donors. This disparity meant that CSOs from the Global North could influence the priorities and approaches of aid programmes, often pushing aside the demands and autonomy of CSOs from the Global South (Roepstorff et al., 2020).

At the same time CSOs from the Global North became increasingly dependent on funding from Western governments. This funding came with objectives and conditions that aligned projects with donor countries' strategic interests. As a result, **CSOs from the Global North tend to be more accountable to their donors than to the communities they serve**. This misalignment leads to programmes that fail to address local needs and even conflict with them (Moyo, 2009).

The reliance on foreign experts and the imposition of external models of development weaken local capacity for self-determination and agency, echoing colonial relationships (Tuck et al., 2012). Western organisations tend to position themselves as rescuers of the Global South, sidelining local expertise and promoting externally designed solutions (Betts, 2021). This dynamic is often referred to as the **white saviour complex**.

ODA moves to innocence:

In response to growing criticism, some actors in the ODA have adopted language around localisation and decolonisation, promising to shift power and resources to local actors. However, these efforts remain mostly superficial, as illustrated by the meagre funding that CSOs from the Global South continue to receive (Roepstorff et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2020; Le Naëlou et al, 2020).

It is important to note that many CSOs from the Global South have long advocated for policy changes to address the root causes of inequality in the aid system, and have engaged critically with ODA funding mechanisms. Plan International Belgium recognises that we cannot surpass the expertise or efforts of these organisations, nor do we seek to take the lead in this space. Instead, our aim is to amplify their voices and support their advocacy, using our platform to draw more attention to their work and the structural changes they are calling for. We acknowledge our historical complicity and position of power within the aid sector, and we see our role as one of solidarity and support.

3.3. So... what is decolonisation?

3.3.1. On decolonisation:

> *Decolonisation, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.*
> - **Franz Fanon**

Decolonisation is a complex and inherently dynamic process that cannot be easily defined or confined to a singular meaning. Franz Fanon, a pioneer political philosopher whose work laid the foundation for anti-colonial movements and post-colonial studies, describes decolonisation as a radical, transformative process that dismantles the colonial order and restructures to restore autonomy and humanity to the colonised. He asserts that decolonisation is inherently violent because it involves the complete overthrow of the colonial systems built on violence and oppression. Decolonisation seeks to fundamentally change the power dynamics between

the coloniser and the colonised, aiming to create a new order where the formerly colonised can reclaim their sovereignty, dignity, and identity (Fanon, 1963).

Fanon emphasises that decolonisation is not only a political or territorial transition. It involves a profound social and psychological liberation from the internalised inferiority resulting from colonial rule, including reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems and languages.[5] It is a material, not metaphorical, process that requires the liberation of colonised peoples from the oppressive systems imposed upon them. It is a 'programme of complete disorder' that cannot be achieved through negotiation or compromise but through the assertion of colonised people's will to reclaim their land, culture, and future.

Decolonisation is not a metaphor for social justice or change but a material and political process tied explicitly to the return of land and sovereignty to Indigenous and colonised peoples (Tuck et al., 2012). In this view, symbolic actions, like changing institutional structures or curricula, are insufficient without dismantling neocolonial power systems and addressing material inequalities, such as land restitution.

While decolonisation is a dynamic and complex process, it cannot be conflated with broader social justice efforts. Tuck et al. highlight the 'ethic of incommensurability,' which insists that decolonisation is distinct from movements like anti-racism, which often operate within existing colonial frameworks.[6] This distinction underscores the unique and non-negotiable demands of decolonisation, which cannot be reduced to metaphorical or reformist practices.

Another important defining parameter of decolonisation is that it is a movement led by Indigenous and colonised people in revolutionary struggles against colonial powers. It is Indigenous and colonised people who carry the primary burden of reclaiming their sovereignty and dismantling the colonial systems that have dispossessed them. Therefore, they cannot be sidelined in any decolonisation process or discussion.

3.3.2. The paradox of 'decolonising aid'

The concept of 'decolonising aid' has gained traction in recent years. However, the casual and metaphorical use of 'decolonisation' in this context dilutes its meaning and undermines the decolonisation movements. **Decolonisation is a distinct project that involves the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it cannot be reduced to a set of reforms within existing colonial structures. As such, decolonising aid conflicts with the foundational demands of decolonisation** (Tuck et al., 2012; Bahdi et al. 2016; Rio, 2024; Appleton, 2019; Shringarpure, 2020; Ngugi, 2020).

ODA, deeply rooted in colonial and neocolonial power structures, often perpetuates the very systems that decolonisation seeks to dismantle. ODA is tied to geopolitical interests, with donor countries using it to exert influence over recipient nations, secure access to resources, or promote political agendas aligned with their own interests. The way ODA is structured and funded reinforces global power imbalances. Donor countries retain control over how aid is allocated and used, perpetuating colonial relationships of power and dependency. ODA is therefore inherently part of colonial and neocolonial frameworks and can't truly be decolonised. **The supposed 'decolonisation of aid' becomes a contradiction in terms, as true decolonisation would require donor countries to relinquish control and dismantle the aid system as it currently exists**.

5 Scholars argue that colonial structures persist in knowledge, governance, and identity even after formal independence, necessitating a focus on decoloniality (Betts 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Mignolo, 2017). Decoloniality seeks to 'delink' from the colonial matrix of power that shapes these systems (Mignolo, 2017). However, Indigenous scholars and activists critique decolonial theories for depicting decolonisation movements in a narrowed way and for creating a dichotomy between political sovereignty and epistemic struggles. This distinction invisiblises the material and urgent realities faced by Indigenous peoples that shape epistemologies. The notion of 'coloniality' and 'decoloniality' also overlooks the ongoing occupation by settlers in various territories, including Latin America (Tuck et al., 2012; Temin, 2024).

6 This does not mean that we need a strict separation between these issues, as it may overlook the interconnectedness of various struggles and the potential for solidarity.

When aid organisations attempt to 'decolonise' their practices, they often remain stuck at the 'reflection' stage or fall into performative reforms such as incorporating local perspectives, increasing diversity among staff or adjusting narratives to be more culturally sensitive. While these efforts may appear progressive, they only create superficial changes and do not address the fundamental power structures and material conditions that perpetuate neocolonialism through aid. This metaphorisation serves to alleviate guilt and maintain the status quo, allowing aid organisations to continue operating within a system that exploits and controls recipient nations.

In this sense, **the paradox of 'decolonising aid' becomes clear: if aid organisations are part of a neocolonial funding system, they cannot achieve genuine decolonisation. A more realistic, if still challenging, path involves dismantling white supremacy and reducing the harm of neocolonialism within the sector**. Organisations can implement structural changes that address how decisions are made, how funds are distributed, and how Global North power is leveraged. Such shifts include prioritising Southern-led agendas, genuinely consulting and compensating partners from the Global South, rethinking growth imperatives and branding priorities, and actively and consistently holding Northern governments and corporations to account for ongoing harm and historical injustices, rather than focusing on charitable transfers or paternalistic narratives (GADNET, 2022; Comic Relief, 2023; UAF-Africa, 2023). Furthermore, Global North organisations should consider their positionality and interrogate whether they should continue in these intermediary functions at all, or whether sunsetting such roles and directly transferring resources and influence to CSOs from the Global South might be more appropriate. At Plan International Belgium, we have explored what these reforms and practices would look like for us. We describe them in the last section of this position paper.

The paradox of 'decolonising aid' becomes clear: if aid organisations depend on a neocolonial funding system, they cannot achieve genuine decolonisation. A more realistic, if still challenging, path involves dismantling white supremacy and reducing the harm of neocolonialism within the sector.

This is not to deny that certain forms of aid can transcend neocolonial frameworks. Mutual aid[7] systems and diaspora solidarity networks[8] offer examples of aid that operate outside conventional ODA frameworks. Unlike large-scale aid structures tied to donor governments, these initiatives are often grounded in community-based trust, shared identities, and reciprocal obligations. They can bypass the geopolitics and top-down mandates that typically define ODA, allowing for more flexible, context-specific forms of support (Spade, 2020; INCITE!, 2007; Phillips, 2013). Diaspora groups may mobilise resources swiftly and redirect them directly to local recipients without the bureaucratic constraints of mainstream aid.

Their success relies on precisely this independence: once pulled into existing aid hierarchies, they risk losing the grassroots autonomy and relational accountability that make them so effective. Co-opting mutual aid or diaspora networks into the ODA system could replicate the same power imbalances, donor-driven agendas, and branding imperatives that mirror neocolonial practices (Espinosa, 2015; INCITE!, 2007; Spade, 2020). In other words, it is the very ability to remain parallel to ODA that allows these networks to transcend many of the issues inherent in large-scale aid, demonstrating a model of solidarity rooted in shared power rather than external control. Global North CSOs must carefully consider how their positionality could distort these parallel systems if they attempt to partner with or scale up such initiatives.

7 Mutual aid is collective coordination of a group of people to meet each other's needs.

8 Diaspora organisations are managed by diaspora members and/or have a majority of diaspora membership.

What does feminism have to do with all of this?

> *The struggle against patriarchy and racism must be substantively robust and inextricably intertwined.*
> - **Kimberlé Crenshaw**

The intersection of racism, patriarchy and neocolonialism in international aid is deeply rooted in global systems of domination and exploitation that have their origins in colonial histories. From a decolonial feminist perspective, these dynamics disproportionately impact women and girls of colour by reinforcing patriarchal, racialised and capitalist power structures (Kapoor, 2004; Wilson, 2015; Vergès, 2019).

Problematising white feminism in aid

Women and girls in the Global South are often portrayed as victims needing rescue. This narrative is particularly linked to white feminist approaches that fail to address the intersection of race, class, and gender (Mohanty, 2003; COFEM, 2021). These approaches centre Western ideals of gender equality and empowerment, which may not align with the cultural realities or priorities of women and girls in the Global South. For instance, many aid programmes emphasise economic empowerment as the solution to gender inequality, often within a neoliberal framework that prioritises individual success over systemic change. Programmes such as microloans or vocational training reduce empowerment to measurable economic outcomes, ignoring structural issues like land dispossession, exploitative labour markets, and institutionalised gender discrimination (Wilson, 2015; Lang et al., 2013).

White feminism at the service of (neo)colonialism

A key critique of aid is how feminist discourse has been co-opted to further colonial and neoliberal agendas. Historically, 'civilisational feminism' was used to align gender equality with colonial objectives. French colonial feminism in the Maghreb, for instance, framed the liberation of Maghrebi women as part of the colonial mission, using this rhetoric to justify military interventions while simultaneously perpetuating systemic oppression. 'Liberated' Maghrebi women were portrayed as symbols of progress under French rule, while their autonomy and broader struggles against colonial domination were erased (Taraud, 2008; Vergès, 2020). This pattern persists today, with contemporary development practices often deploying feminist rhetoric to justify interventions to 'liberate' women and girls in the Global South while overlooking the interconnectedness of racism, neocolonialism and capitalism with gender oppression.

In contemporary aid, neoliberal feminism continues this trend. Neoliberal feminism commodifies empowerment, framing women as hyper-industrious subjects responsible for economic growth. Women, especially in the Global South, are increasingly drawn into exploitative labour markets or informal economies under the guise of empowerment. Structural adjustment policies and the dismantling of welfare systems have intensified women's unpaid care burdens and entrenched their economic insecurity (Lang et al., 2013; Vergès, 2021). The reliance on racialised labour in global capitalist systems perpetuates these inequalities, using women's bodies as sites for exploitation while silencing their collective voices (Wilson, 2015). Despite this difficult reality, aid programmes promoting economic empowerment frequently adopt neoliberal frameworks that focus on increasing women's labour force participation while ignoring this broader oppressive context (Wilson, 2015; Reyes, 2021; Mohanty, 2003).

Marginalising feminist movements from the Global South
This narrow framing sidelines grassroots feminist movements in the Global South that confront both local manifestations of patriarchy and the systemic inequalities perpetuated by white supremacy, neocolonialism and neoliberalism. These movements often adopt intersectional approaches, addressing issues such as environmental justice, land rights, and economic sovereignty alongside gender equality (Lang et al., 2013).

White and neoliberal feminisms also reinforce the paternalistic view that women in the Global South are passive beneficiaries of aid rather than active agents of change. Their voices and expertise are often excluded from programme design and implementation, perpetuating the very hierarchies these programmes claim to dismantle (Roche et al., 2021; Vergès, 2020).

The need for a decolonial and intersectional feminist lens
To address anti-racism, localisation, and decolonisation in the aid sector, a decolonial feminist and intersectional feminist lens is essential. This approach challenges the intertwined structures of racism, patriarchy, and neocolonialism, advocating for systemic change that is led by and accountable to the girls, women, and communities most affected by these injustices. This involves centring the agency and leadership of women in the Global South, rejecting the universalisation of Western feminist ideals in favour of context-specific strategies rooted in lived realities (Mohanty, 2003).

3.4. Localisation of aid

Localisation refers to the process of shifting power and decision-making in humanitarian aid and development from Global North actors to Global South communities and organisations such as national and grassroot CSOs and governments. This approach seeks to address long-standing criticisms of the traditional, top-down aid model, where decision-making has often been dominated by international actors, typically from the Global North.

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 marked a critical milestone in the localisation discourse. The declaration emphasises the need for local ownership, alignment of donor support with local priorities, and mutual accountability. It aimed to make aid more effective by shifting control to recipient countries and aligning aid with national development strategies, thereby laying the foundations for more localised approaches (Roepstorff, 2019).

The concept of localisation gained further prominence in the humanitarian sector during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, where the Grand Bargain was launched. It introduced key commitments towards localisation, aiming to allocate at least 25% of direct humanitarian funding to local and national responders. This initiative was a response to the criticism that international aid, while often well-intentioned, was driven by external actors with limited understanding of the contexts in which they operate. The localisation agenda emerging from the Grand Bargain was framed as a step towards correcting these imbalances by empowering actors and organisations from the Global South.

As part of the Grand Bargain, major international donors and organisations committed to supporting localisation by increasing direct funding to actors from the Global South and strengthening their capacity. Plan International has made similar commitments in its localisation position paper. However, progress towards this goal has been slow, and many organisations from the Global South still struggle to access significant funding without international intermediaries. Only 1.2% of direct funding was channelled to CSOs from the Global South in 2022 (Development Initiatives, 2023).

While definitions of localisation vary, they tend to include one or more of the following pillars:

- Localisation aims to **transfer power, authority, and leadership** from 'international' organisations to local actors. This includes decision-making in programme design, resource allocation, and implementation. It challenges the traditional power imbalances where 'international actors' dominate the aid landscape. Localisation promotes partnerships between 'international' and local actors that are based on mutual respect and equality. This means that 'international actors' should not simply delegate tasks to local partners but should involve them in strategic decision-making and ensure that local knowledge and expertise are valued.

- Localisation is about **'building' the capacity of local actors to take charge** of humanitarian responses and development programmes. This includes providing them with the resources, skills, and support they need to manage and lead aid initiatives. The rationale is that local organisations are more familiar with cultural, political, and social contexts, making their responses more cost-effective, relevant and sustainable.

- One of the core pillars of localisation is to ensure that **local organisations receive more direct funding** from donors. Traditionally, 'international' organisations act as intermediaries, with only a small percentage of funds reaching Global South CSOs. Localisation seeks to change this dynamic by increasing the flow of resources directly to the affected communities and grassroot organisations.

- Localisation also involves **greater accountability to the communities being served**. Local actors are more likely to be held accountable by their own communities, as they have closer relationships with the people they serve. This can improve transparency and trust in the aid process.

- Localisation seeks to **reduce the dependency of communities on international aid** by promoting self-sufficiency and resilience.

At Federation level, Plan International defines localisation as "reconfiguring power to define success to the point of impact. By ensuring the equal and active participation of local actors in the process of storytelling, programme design and implementation, as well as grants proposals and even governance" (Plan International, 2024).

SOMALIA: A man and a woman are holding empty plates surrounded by their children and standing in front of a tent.
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4. Critical reflections and positions on anti-racism, localisation and decolonising aid

In the aid sector, 'decolonisation,' 'anti-racism,' and 'localisation' are widely proclaimed but seldom realised in a transformative way. Global North donors, agencies, institutions and INGOs, including Plan International Belgium, remain complicit; while advocating progressive reforms, we still control agendas, funding flows, and decision-making processes. Our position of power perpetuates colonial-era hierarchies, resulting in superficial changes that ultimately protect the status quo.

This section critically examines some of the pervasive issues with how the international aid sector has approached decolonisation, localisation and anti-racism. It analyses how colonialism and white supremacy persist, how ODA's colonial roots shape current practices, and why piecemeal reforms fail to redistribute power. It also unpacks how concepts like 'decolonisation' can be reduced to buzzwords, sidestepping the need for structural overhauls. By analysing these interconnected issues—ongoing colonial legacies, donor-driven frameworks, the local–international binary, and the co-opting of feminist and anti-racist language—this section calls for a fundamental shift. It shows how we must genuinely centre Global South leadership and adopt a radical, decolonial feminist approach if we wish to dismantle the intertwined systems of oppression that are white supremacy, colonialism and patriarchy.

Plan International Belgium recognises that we cannot surpass the expertise or efforts of Global South scholars and organisations, nor do we seek to take the lead in this space. Instead, our aim is to amplify their voices and support their advocacy, using our platform to draw more attention to their work and the structural changes they are calling for. We acknowledge our historical complicity and position of power within the aid sector, and we see our role as one of solidarity and support.

In our critical reflections and positions, we are confronted with many paradoxes. Sometimes, our motivations to change internally and to foster transformational change externally can be contradictory to 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. First, because we are accountable to our main impact group: girls and their communities. As such, our fundraising strategy is set up to secure programming and influencing for gender-transformative change. We believe we can keep delivering impact for girls and their communities while committing to mitigate the harm of colonialism and white supremacy in our work and across the aid sector. Second, we are convinced that we are not isolated in our critique; among the various stakeholders of the ODA system, including within governments and agencies, there are strong pockets of support for a transformational, radical change in the anti-racism, localisation, and decolonisation journey. This paper is an opportunity to engage with allies across the board in mitigating the impact of neocolonialism, and addressing racism and white supremacy in the aid sector. Third, by naming these contradictions, we create opportunity to change: in our advocacy discourse, in our positions, in the way we deliver programming and influencing.

Our collective aim is not to shame anyone but to acknowledge differences in perspective and power. Acknowledging the tensions we face every day is not an attack on our work and the work of our peers, but a call for transparent and brave dialogues, and collective action.

4.1. Colonisation is not something from the past

Colonisation is often perceived as a historical phenomenon that concluded with the wave of decolonisation movements in the mid-20th century. However, it continues to persist in various forms today. There are still territories that have not attained full independence and remain under the administrative control of other nations. According to the United Nations, there are 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories where the process of decolonisation is incomplete. Moreover, Indigenous populations, including Palestinians, continue to struggle against ongoing forms of settler colonialism and occupation (OHCHR, 2022; ICJ, 2024). These communities face challenges such as land dispossession, cultural erosion, political marginalisation, and violent repression of resistance movements. They face current policies that undermine Indigenous sovereignty, exploit natural resources without fair compensation, and impose external governance. Colonial practices are therefore far from over. Recognising colonisation as a present-day issue is essential for addressing the systemic inequalities and injustices that persist in these areas.

Plan International Belgium's Position

Plan International Belgium challenges 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 enduring injustices. This means we affirm that we are willing to act in support of them.

GAZA: Two people sit on a sandy embankment, facing away from the camera, looking towards a cityscape of heavily damaged and destroyed buildings under a cloudy sky.
© Fatima Hassouna

4.2. By prioritising Global North interests, ODA perpetuates colonialism

ODA has its roots in colonial ideologies, shifting from overt control to covert interventions framed as aid intended to improve conditions in the Global South. Despite the evolution in terminology, hierarchical relationships persist, effectively maintaining colonial power structures (Ziai, 2016). Development discourse often imposes Western economic, political and cultural norms as universal ideals, mirroring colonialist practices and disregarding the diverse needs, cultures, and systems of Global South countries.

This approach empowers a new class of Western 'experts' and international institutions – such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – to 'manage' the development of the Global South. These entities dictate policies and development agendas without sufficient consideration of local contexts or meaningful engagement with local stakeholders, perpetuating economic dependencies and exacerbating inequalities (Escobar, 2012; Ziai, 2016). The transition from colonial 'civilising missions' to development aid is rhetorical, as the fundamental power relations remain intact, with the Global North retaining control over the economic and political trajectories of Global South nations.

Aid often serves the interests of donor countries more than those of the recipients (Pal et al., 2023; Onyekachi, 2020; Pal et al., 2023; Moyo, 2009; Kapoor, 2004). A significant portion of aid is tied to the procurement of goods and services from donor nations, effectively turning aid into a subsidy for the donor countries' industries and markets. Conditionalities attached to aid packages frequently compel recipient countries to implement neoliberal policies that negatively impact local economies and social welfare. These practices reinforce global power imbalances and economic dependency, promoting the notion that the Global South perpetually needs assistance from the Global North. It undermines the agency of recipient countries and stifles the development of local industries and capacities.

Despite decades of development interventions, global poverty and inequality persist. This enduring failure is attributable to development models that prioritise economic growth and donor interests over addressing the structural causes of global inequalities – many of which are rooted in colonialism. The self-serving nature of aid thus perpetuates the very issues it purports to solve.

Plan International Belgium's Position

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

4.3. Why reforming INGOs alone will not resolve structural problems in ODA

ODA is predominantly controlled by donor countries, typically members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These governments allocate funds based on their foreign policy priorities and commitments to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development. ODA is distributed through bilateral aid programmes – direct transfers from donor to recipient governments – or via multilateral organisations like the United Nations and the World Bank, which manage large-scale development initiatives. Additionally, donor countries channel funds though Global North CSOs, including INGOs, that implement projects on the ground, typically with Global South partners.

Despite their role in delivering aid, CSOs receive only a small portion of the overall ODA budget, as 3% goes to CSOs globally (Development Initiatives, 2016). Most INGOs depend on ODA as a primary source of funding. Their dependence on donor funding means that aid often comes with specific conditions and priorities set by donor governments. There is, at the same time, a substantial focus and pressure placed on INGOs to implement decolonisation and localisation efforts. This expectation overlooks the fact that INGOs operate within a donor-driven framework that significantly constrains their ability to enact radical changes. Donor countries, which control the majority of ODA funding, set agendas that INGOs must navigate to secure necessary resources. While INGOs are not exempt from responsibility in perpetuating neocolonialism and white supremacy, nor can they deny the privileges and powers they hold within the ODA landscape, the structural limitations they face are considerable.

As a European-based INGO and a national organisation within a large international Federation, Plan International Belgium faces additional complexities. Our influence on overarching policies and funding decisions is limited by the broader federation's priorities. This structure can constrain our ability to push for significant systemic changes and often requires us to align with federation-wide directives. We are also subject to pressure from political actors and movements that criticise, challenge and question the very existence, purpose and relevance of aid. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that we hold more power than many other Global North and Global South organisations, and have a responsibility to use our position constructively. For instance, our structure can also represent a tremendous opportunity to leverage change through targeted action and advocacy at the global level.

Plan International Belgium's position

Plan International Belgium recognises that the current ODA system inherently perpetuates colonial ideologies and reinforces global power imbalances.

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 push 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 hence 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 transformative 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.

4.4. 'Decolonisation' as a buzzword protects the status quo

Decolonisation has increasingly become a buzzword in the aid sector, often co-opted by Western organisations to demonstrate progressiveness. The term, originally rooted in the radical demand for dismantling colonial systems and returning land to Indigenous and colonised peoples, has been diluted and repurposed to address more palatable goals, such as improving inclusion and diversity. When decolonisation is reduced to a symbolic concept or conflated with other social justice movements, it fails to acknowledge the tangible outcomes that decolonisation demands (Tuck et al., 2012; Shringarpure, 2020; Ngugi, 2020; Bahdi et al. 2016; Rio, 2024; Appleton, 2019).

This superficial use of the word decolonisation allows Western aid organisations and institutions, including Plan International Belgium, to maintain relevance without making any substantive changes. Rather than addressing the deep-seated colonial legacies that underpin the global aid system, Western institutions focus on reducing the most visible elements of white supremacy. This approach promotes symbolic actions, allowing aid organisations to adopt progressive language and engage in performative gestures while leaving structural inequalities intact.

By focusing on inclusion rather than the redistribution of power and resources, this performative approach perpetuates the status quo. The Global North continues to dictate socio-economic and political norms for the Global South, sidelining local organisations and communities (Khan, 2021; Pailey, 2019). Even when Northern institutions claim to 'decolonise aid' through increased Global South participation or shared decision-making, these efforts remain confined within the neocolonial aid systems. As such, these initiatives are more about reducing visible aspects of white supremacy than addressing the radical demands of decolonisation.

More importantly, the current aid system contradicts the foundational principles of decolonisation. Aid frequently reinforces neocolonial structures by imposing external values, frameworks, and priorities on recipient countries while ensuring aid is ultimately benefitting the interests of the donor countries. Reforms to this neocolonial aid system, such as Global South participation or shared decision-making, do not equate to decolonising the aid system. Decolonisation would require a complete overhaul of the aid system, including debt cancellation and tax justice, ensuring funding is delinked from geopolitical interests and conditionalities, and returning control and sovereignty to Global South CSOs without external influence.

Plan International Belgium's position

Plan International Belgium acknowledges 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, returning land and resources to Indigenous and colonised peoples.

We understand that decolonisation, anti-racism, and feminism are interconnected yet distinct struggles. Each requires specific approaches and attention to unique forms of power and oppression.

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 PoC in shaping these critical conversations.

4.5. Where is the local? The dichotomy of international-local is reductive

The concept of the 'local' in development discourse is often framed in a reductive binary with the 'international'. This framing oversimplifies complex realities in the Global South into a one-dimensional view and reinforces problematic dynamics.

A key shortfall in this binary discourse is its reductive depiction of 'the local'. CSOs from the Global South are far from homogeneous; they range from small community-based groups to national advocacy NGOs, regional coalitions, and internationally recognised movements (Barbelet, 2018; Roepstorff, 2019). By implying that the 'local' is a singular category, Global North donors and CSOs mask the diversity of interests, capacities, and levels of influence that such organisations hold (Roche et al., 2020; Barbelet, 2018).

This dichotomy of international-local also leads to exclusionary practices, where 'local' actors who do not fit the binary expectations of international donors are marginalised. Here the question of 'who represents the local' is key, as not all CSOs from the Global South are equally empowered or capable of influencing the development aid agenda. International organisations may selectively engage with certain CSOs from the Global South who align with their own priorities, often leaving out marginalised or grassroots groups, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities within a particular context in the Global South.

This reductive view fails to account for the entangled relationships and power dynamics that exist within communities and between 'local' and 'international' actors. It reinforces the idea that development flows in one direction, from the 'developed' North to the 'underdeveloped' South. It also amplifies existing hierarchies and leads to the imposition of Global North standards that overlook the diversity of the Global South's needs and interests (Roepstorff, 2019).

This international-local framing further positions the 'local' as both a problem needing external intervention and a romanticised solution to international development failures (Roche et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2021; Roepstorff, 2019). The 'local' is romanticised as inherently more authentic, legitimate, or effective in development and humanitarian work. This view obscures the fact that CSOs from the Global South operate within complex and sometimes oppressive power structures, including local elites, patriarchal systems, and state control (Roche et al., 2020; Roepstorff, 2019; COFEM, 2021). When Global North donors and CSOs impose romanticised expectations of 'local actors', they ignore or exacerbate these internal inequalities. Instead of recognising and addressing these challenges, Global North donors and CSOs often presume that 'local' organisations will automatically be more accountable and representative, even though many are subject to the same power imbalances found within 'international' institutions

Plan International Belgium's position

Plan International Belgium believes that the current localisation discourse oversimplifies local dynamics and fails to account for the diversity of CSOs from the Global South.

We believe that 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.

4.6. Top-down decolonisation and localisation ticks the box but doesn't redistribute power

The discussion of 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. These discussions should inherently centre the knowledge and agency of the Global South, yet in practice, discussion often marginalises these perspectives in favour of Western or Northern narratives. This exclusion reflects the colonial legacy of the Global North claiming authority over discourses related to justice and equity, perpetuating the very inequalities they seek to dismantle (Shringarpure, 2020; Pailey, 2019).

When Global South perspectives are included, they are often tokenised or instrumentalised to serve the interests of Northern donors. For example, CSOs from the Global South tend to be consulted in strategy development processes or global forums, but not given meaningful control and decision-making power. These interactions often reinforce Western frameworks, essentialising and romanticising ethnic identities, which can obscure structural inequalities and perpetuate the status quo (Kapoor, 2004). Large, well-established organisations from the Global South are often favoured, sidelining grassroots or community-led initiatives, particularly those representing 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. Furthermore, donor-imposed conditions and stringent reporting requirements restrict the autonomy of organisations from the Global South, limiting their ability to develop context-specific solutions (Roche et al., 2021). Due to these constraints, localisation efforts by intermediary Global North CSOs often appear superficial in practice, aimed more at fulfilling donor requirements than at genuinely shifting power dynamics.

Another critical issue arises when INGOs nationalise their affiliated entities or relocate headquarters to the Global South, thereby positioning themselves as 'local' organisations. This strategic rebranding and change of organisational address allows them to meet donor requirements that favour local organisations in the Global South, without embodying the true essence of grassroots entities formed by and representing affected communities (Roepstorff et al., 2020; Chadwick, 2024). Ultimately, this allows those INGOs to capitalise on 'local' rhetoric, while perpetuating neocolonial power relations and maintaining top-down control with CSOs from the Global South.

This pseudo-localisation reinforces the local-international binary, as 'local' actors are still dependent on 'international' frameworks, even as they are expected to take on greater responsibility for aid delivery (Roche et al., 2021; Roepstorff, 2019). The promise of power redistribution remains unfulfilled.

For this power shift to be meaningful and ethical, it requires a recognition of the complicity of Northern donors and CSOs in global power structures and an active unlearning of privileges. Engaging ethically with Global South CSOs means genuinely learning from marginalised voices and shifting away from Western hegemonic narratives that romanticise ethnic identities and obscure deeper structural inequalities (Spivak, 2004). It requires Global North organisations to transfer resources and influence to CSOs from the Global South.

Plan International Belgium's Position

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 that current localisation efforts often reinforce Northern frameworks and fail to empower CSOs from the Global South as intended, maintaining a local-international binary. We also acknowledge that our position as a stakeholder of a broader ODA system may block us in leading transformative change; we recognise this tension and paradox and chose to address it by holding ourselves and our Federation accountable for modelling and advocating for positive 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 transformative change and restrict the full autonomy of CSOs from the Global South.

SWITZERLAND: A woman sits in at the UN Human Rights Council conference hall with her back to the camera, raising her hand to speak.

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4.7. Global South CSOs are still grossly underfunded under the localisation agenda

Despite the rhetoric of localisation, Global South CSOs still receive only a fraction of direct funding. While only 3% of ODA goes to CSOs (Development Initiatives, 2016), Global North CSOs receive the lion's share of this funding, leaving less than 10% for Global South CSOs (#ShiftThePower, 2024). Women's rights organisations for instance, only receive 0.13% of total ODA and only 0.4% of all gender-related aid (AWID, 2021). In humanitarian contexts, only 1.2% of direct funding was channelled to CSOs from the affected countries in 2022, a proportion that remained nearly unchanged despite growing attention on localisation of aid in various international fora (Development Initiatives, 2023). This structural inequity forces Global South CSOs into dependency on Global North intermediaries, which perpetuates neocolonial power dynamics and limits Global South CSOs' ability to engage in long-term planning (Le Naëlou et al., 2020; Roepstorff, 2019).

The current funding model often relies on intermediaries and project-based approaches that hinder long-term sustainability. Global South CSOs, including feminist and women's rights organisations, struggle to align their transformative agendas with the short-term, outcome-focused priorities of Global North donors. This dynamic leaves Global South CSOs at a disadvantage, preventing them from accessing direct funding, and perpetuating a power imbalance that favours Global North CSOs (Roche et al., 2020; Roepstorff, 2019).

Moreover, stringent donor requirements, including complex reporting and compliance demands, create barriers for Global South CSOs that may lack the capacity and resources to meet these standards. This setup further reinforces dependency on indirect funding through Global North intermediaries (Le Naëlou et al., 2020).

Furthermore, many Global North CSOs use localisation as a fundraising tool rather than a genuine shift in power dynamics (Roche et al., 2021; #ShiftThePower, 2020). In many cases, Global North CSOs outcompete Global South CSOs for domestic resources due to their larger budgets and better-established infrastructures, thereby reinforcing the dependency of Global South CSOs on international aid flows (Roepstorff, 2019; Roepstorff, 2020; Chadwick, 2024). Instead of empowering Global South CSOs, this creates a master-servant dynamic, where Global North CSOs continue to control resources, knowledge, and visibility in the development sector.

Plan International Belgium's Position

Plan International Belgium recognises the structural inequality in funding distribution and the need for increased direct and 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 non-conditional, 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.

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

The narrative of 'development' in the Global South is often shaped by ethnocentric universalism within Western feminism, which judges cultural, legal, and economic structures by Western standards. This not only reinforces the narrative of 'underdevelopment' it sidelines the resistance movements and voices of Global South women and girls (Mohanty, 2003). The persistence of the white gaze in development positions Global South girls and women as passive subjects in need of saving and as a 'smart investment', sustaining a colonial logic where Western norms define progress and morality (Pailey, 2019; Wilson, 2015; Taraud, 2008).

This neocolonial dynamic is further reflected in the enduring narrative that portrays women of the Global South as helpless victims (Kapoor, 2004). Today, this narrative is replicated in international aid efforts, where the focus is often on 'rescuing' girls and women rather than addressing the structural factors that limit their agency. By framing them as victims, this approach reinforces the trope of the passive, powerless 'Third World woman' (Mohanty, 2003; COFEM, 2021; Abdi, 2021; Pailey, 2019), erasing the diverse and complex ways in which they resist oppression.

Neoliberal feminist frameworks, which have come to dominate the development sector, exacerbate this dynamic. By promoting Global South girls and women as entrepreneurial agents within capitalist systems, these frameworks sidestep the structural inequalities that sustain their marginalisation (Wilson, 2015; Reyes, 2021). This portrayal reduces girls and women to economic assets, instrumentalising their labour and productivity for the global economy while ignoring their inherent rights and the deeper systems of oppression they face.

A clear example of this is the 'girled development model', which often focuses on girls' education and future economic contributions without addressing the gendered power structures that constrain their lives (Wilson, 2015; Mohanty, 2003). These campaigns measure the value of girls and women in terms of their economic utility, reinforcing neoliberal goals and neglecting the need for genuine social transformation. Plan International, like many other organisations, has contributed to this narrative, framing girls primarily as future contributors to the economy rather than as individuals with rights that need defending now.[9]

As such, the neocolonialism and white supremacy that entrench international aid continue to centre Western feminist frameworks, doubly marginalising girls and women of colour by reinforcing racial and gender hierarchies. The sector fails to recognise how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class shape the experiences of marginalised peoples. Feminist concepts, such as intersectionality and transnational solidarity, which were originally developed by women of colour to address these intersecting forms of oppression, have been co-opted by neocolonial aid institutions. They are now often used as identity markers–where signalling belonging to a specific group and representing that group becomes the main focus–rather than used as tools for dismantling structural inequality (Pal et al., 2023). This depoliticisation shifts the focus from challenging the systems of oppression to participating within them, ultimately undermining the radical potential of decolonial feminist work to transform society (Mohanty, 2003; Pal et al., 2023; Lang et al., 2013; Reyes, 2021).

9 Some examples include blogs putting forward arguments to support girls' rights because girls' education **'could lift GDP in emerging economies'**, **because girls can 'pull their family out of poverty'**, or because **'women's education is linked to health benefits for their children'**.

Plan International Belgium's Position

Plan International Belgium recognises that development narratives shaped by Western feminist frameworks often 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 that the portrayal of Global South girls and women as economic assets within neoliberal frameworks reduces the realisation of girls' rights to an economic growth strategy. Such a vision 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.

NIGERIA: Several hands stacked together in a gesture of unity and support.
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4.9. 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. This approach 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 (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Srivastava, 2005; Aouragh, 2019). As a result, many organisations frame racism as an individual failure rather than an institutional one. The discourse remains at the level of individual intentions and personal guilt, rather than tackling how white supremacy is embedded in hiring practices, funding allocation, decision-making, and programme implementation (Srivastava, 2005; Kapoor, 2004; Jones, 2013). In many cases, organisations may celebrate individual acts of self-reflection or allyship as progress, but fail to make changes in leadership representation, power distribution, or the ways in which aid is delivered. Ultimately, the work is not the workshop (Jones, 2013).

While many organisations focus on personal development, such as anti-racist training or workshops aimed at raising awareness among staff, as a solution to racism, these efforts remain insufficient without systemic change. Additionally, the emphasis of these training and workshops often is put on individual attributes rather than addressing the systemic roots of oppression. Privilege, often misunderstood as the cause rather than the consequence of oppression, simplifies the complexity of racism to individual behaviour, missing the broader power structures that sustain racial inequality (Abdi, 2021; Aouragh, 2019). This leads to re-centring whiteness in the discussion and relying on interpersonal accountability for change, which leaves systemic racism unchanged. It also leads to the fragmentation of collective solidarity among PoC towards narrower identity markers (often anchored in skin-colour hierarchies), shifting the preoccupation to who is 'truly oppressed', rather than how to forge alliances around shared exploitation under white supremacy and other systems of oppression (Aouragh, 2019).

Additionally, white aid workers frequently respond to accusations of racism with emotional reactions such as anger, guilt, or tears. These reactions, driven by a desire to preserve a self-image as 'non-racist' and morally good, derail conversations on structural racism. When white individuals feel their complicity in racist systems is challenged, they often react defensively, interpreting these challenges as attacks on their moral integrity. This defensive posture shifts the focus away from addressing the root causes of inequality to managing white discomfort, allowing existing power dynamics to persist (Srivastava, 2005).

These emotional responses further cultivate a climate where discussions on racism become reactive, rather than transformative. White workers, fearing 'getting it wrong,' avoid accountability and engage in discussions that focus on their personal guilt rather than collective action to dismantle systemic racism. This environment delays structural change and continues to privilege the feelings of white staff over the lived experiences of people of colour within the organisation (Srivastava, 2005; COFEM, 2021). This focus on being the 'perfect white anti-racist ally' may also stem from white supremacy culture, where perfectionism and defensiveness are important characteristics (Jones, 2013).

This emotional response reflects not just individual reactions but a larger systemic resistance to racial justice work. It is part of the larger colonial narrative, where settler colonisers see themselves as benevolent actors and, therefore, above criticism (Tuck et al., 2012). In this framing, the discomfort or emotional pain of white aid workers is seen as more significant than the systemic harm caused by the continued colonial dynamics of aid itself.

Today's 'checking your privilege' model overshadows collective or structural goals. By focusing predominantly on awareness, guilt, or personal transformation, aid organisations fail to address the systemic, material forces that reproduce racism. These responses should be redirected to collective accountability measures and channelled into policies, concrete power shifts, and accountability to communities most affected by racism. Individual 'awareness' is a necessary starting point but it falls short if it does not lead to dismantling structures that maintain racial hierarchies. Dismantling white supremacy and tackling racism within an organisation requires both introspection and systemic, collective change.

Plan International Belgium's Position

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 that the focus must move beyond 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 the focus from individual guilt to collective accountability. As such, we encourage solidarity within our organisation. That means recognising how power operates, listening to PoC, and transforming the spaces where decisions are made. We invite and encourage allies to advocate for policies and procedures that change organisational systems and promote equality, and to be accountable to those most impacted by racism and white supremacy, that is, to PoC.

We acknowledge that systemic change takes time and resources; and that structural changes involving the entire organisation and supporting our staff in this journey are necessary.

RWANDA: A teenage girl stands outdoors holding notebooks, wearing a white shirt and tan skirt, with greenery in the background.

INDIA: A group of girls stand together with raised fists, and one girl at the front holds a megaphone.
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5. Plan International Belgium's commitments to dismantle white supremacy

Using a decolonial feminist lens, we critically examined our role within the aid sector, and we commit to transformative actions across our organisation. Our commitments are grounded in our organisation's Vision 2036, structured under five key categories: governance; organisational culture and human resources; programming and partnerships; marketing and communication; and advocacy and influencing. We aim to make clear, impactful changes that address white supremacy in our organisation and in our sector, encouraging the continuation of existing practices that currently prove efficient, and widening such commitments to be more daring for an organisation that is committed to anti-racism.

Our commitments are translated into a separate, actionable roadmap for the coming fiscal years. We recognise that transformational change does not happen overnight, and that clear action plans are necessary to create a strong accountability framework.

5.1. Governance

Commitment 1

Redesign Plan International Belgium's governance structure to represent our target groups. We commit to increasing and maintaining diversity, especially through the representation of young women of colour, in our governance instances, including our Board of Directors, Management Team, and Youth Advisory Panel. We commit to adopting clear guidelines that ensure all members have equal voting power and authority over critical organisational decisions.

Commitment 2

Institutionalise anti-racism work throughout Plan International Belgium, thanks to embedded anti-racism work in our Gender Equality & Inclusion action plan. It will require each department and governance structure to submit action plans outlining how they will tackle racism in their specific processes. To ensure accountability, Plan International Belgium will report on progress of outcomes and challenges of the anti-racism actions in the Gender & Inclusion Review (GIR) and Gender & Inclusion Self-Assessment (GEISA).

Commitment 3

Build pathways to leadership for people of colour by providing structured mentorship and leadership training for underrepresented staff and volunteers. This means collaborating with networks (e.g. migrant women's associations, youth-led organisations) to recruit potential management, Board and Advisory Panel candidates.

5.2. Organisational culture and human resources

Commitment 4

Ensure equitable recruitment, retention and promotion practices, with standardised criteria for recruitment and promotion, in a way that is transparent, competency-based and minimises bias. Concretely, this means allocating budget specifically for inclusive outreach to job platforms serving marginalised communities, implementing career development frameworks with clear timelines and training support, and prioritising staff from marginalised backgrounds for advanced leadership roles. It entails providing flexible work arrangements, mental health resources, and setting up an employee resource group to foster peer support and well-being.

Commitment 5

Enforce strict policies against racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination within the organisation by regularly communicating our existing policies outlining unacceptable behaviours and consequences, and by strengthening our reporting mechanisms, reinforcing safe and accessible channels for reporting incidents and appointing people of colour as personnes de confiance. Aligned with our reporting mechanisms and safeguarding policy, Plan International Belgium will ensure swift and appropriate action is taken when policies are violated.

Commitment 6

Conduct anti-racism and intersectional feminist training for all staff, governance members and volunteers using a comprehensive, mandatory training schedule included in induction packages.

5.3. Programming and partnerships

Commitment 7

Embed an intersectional feminist approach in all our programming in Belgium and internationally. Practically, this means allocating a portion of programme budgets to participatory design workshops, ensuring that women's rights groups, marginalised communities, and youth-led organisations shape objectives and methodologies as much as possible. This participatory commitment should be monitored and reported against the share of project submitted. All along the project cycle, Plan International Belgium will adopt intersectional gender analyses that factor in race, class, and other axes of oppression to drive programme choices.

Commitment 8

Strengthen our accountability to the people we serve and aligned social movements by allocating a portion of programme budgets and technical support to establish inclusive feedback and complaints mechanisms and measures in a way that can be easily monitored and reported. We also commit to expanding equitable partnerships with women's rights, feminist, youth- girl- and women-led organisations and organisations representing marginalised groups in our Belgian programmes, and we encourage our Country Offices to do so in their respective countries.

Commitment 9

Establish equitable partnerships with Country Offices and external partners by cultivating partnerships with Country Offices and external partners that are founded on mutual respect, equity, and joint decision-making. Concretely, we will regularly assess and revise funding and partnership agreements where needed, to streamline compliance requirements, ensure fair resource distribution, and allow flexibility in funding reallocation where donors' policies and procedures allow. We commit to offering and investing in technical support when requested by Country Offices and external partners, in a way that is based on mutual respect.

5.4. Marketing and communication

Commitment 10

Present the people and communities we support with dignity and accuracy in all our communications by continuing to enforce our Tone of Voice and Tone of View guidelines that emphasise dignity, agency, and accurate representation of people and partners we work with. We commit to providing training on respectful storytelling to all staff or vendors involved in content creation through the dissemination of our Tone of Voice and Tone of View guidelines. We commit to conducting regular assessments to identify and address Eurocentric biases or colonial narratives in our communication and to integrate corrections as part of the Gender & Inclusion Review (GIR) and Gender & Inclusion Self-Assessment (GEISA).

Commitment 11

Amplify the voices and stories of our partners and communities we serve by working with Country Offices and Belgian partners in a way that prioritises collaborating with local talent (photographers, camera crews, production agencies) whenever possible to gather stories directly from project participants. This means making space for first-person narratives by representatives from Country Offices and external partners through social media takeovers, blog posts, or event panels.

5.5. Advocacy and influencing

Commitment 12

Influence within the Plan International Federation to reshape our governance structure and partnership model. We will advocate for a change in the criteria to participate in the Members Assembly (where Country Offices become full members of Plan International with equal voting rights) advocating for a reformed Federation model granting all Plan International Offices, including Country Offices, equal decision-making authority.

We will also advocate for a renewed partnership model at the Plan International Federation that ensures equitable power-sharing among COs and partners from the Global South. This means ensuring all parties have an equal voice throughout the programme and influencing cycle, establishing clear mechanisms to monitor and report on the quality of these relationships, prioritising partnerships and alliances with feminist, women's rights, girl-led, women-led, youth-led organisations, and organisations representing marginalised groups. Aligned with the Pledge for Change, we will advocate for a commitment on a target percentage of direct funding to Global South CSOs, prioritising grassroots feminist, women's rights, women-led, youth-led, and Indigenous groups.

We commit to advocating for the use of Plan International's influence to lobby donors for flexible, long-term funding that meets the demands of Global South CSOs and reduces top-down constraints.

Commitment 13

Amplify the advocacy work of global movements for decolonisation, anti-racism, and structural change in the aid sector, in particular Global South CSOs that advocate for reforms in ODA, fair trade policies, debt cancellation, and decoupling aid from geopolitical interests. We will continue to advocate Belgian institutional donors, pushing for flexible, long-term funding that meets the demands of Global South CSOs and reduces top-down constraints. Where possible, we will allocate budgets to sponsor Global South activists (particularly young women of colour) to attend high-level donor roundtables and policy summits. Finally, in solidarity with young women and girls from Belgium and partner countries, we will continue to co-create policy recommendations for Belgian institutional donors, ensuring their voices and lived experiences shape decision-making.

ECUADOR: A young woman wearing traditional clothing and jewellery stands outdoors, looking at the camera.

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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.

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