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Race Matters: The Long Walk to Decolonizing Development NGOs

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Development NGOs have long been under scrutiny for their colonial legacy. Decision-making structures are predominantly white or European. There is little racial equity analysis of staff, programs, and campaigns. Poverty and development are understood as happening “there” in low-income countries. This article analyzes the UK-born NGO ActionAid and its steps toward decolonization. In the 2000s, country directors and international board members diversified beyond British nationals to give more decision-making power to African, Asian, and Latin-American countries. Other advances, yet recent, include an antiracism audit and the start of a large racial equity program. International campaigns are often critical toward the UK’s role in low-income countries or include UK domestic aspects requiring “development” (poverty, climate justice ...). The paper shares practical measures to the sometimes-theoretical debate on decolonization and development. It suggests that this process is not in contradiction—but rather promotes—the mandate of addressing poverty where it is most severe worldwide.

Keywords: NGOs; organizational change; racial equity; poverty; postcolonialism

Introduction

Large development NGOs have been under scrutiny from scholars and media for decades in terms of racism and colonialism.¹ Some have noted how decision-making and working frameworks in the development sector are predominantly white (Bheeroo et al., 2020; Cornish, 2019; Pailey, 2020). Others remind of the invisibility of “race” analysis in development studies and practice (Mohanty, 2002; White, 2002). Still others have questioned the “global poverty” vision of development NGOs, based on a shared mission to eradicate poverty exclusively in the world’s poorest countries but not in the high-income countries where the international organisations are often based. This vision implies “othering” poverty and development elsewhere while overlooking poverty and development in richer ones (Luetchford & Burns, 2003; Pickering-Saqqqa, 2019a).

For their part, development NGOs have sought to decolonize their structures, for instance, with the introduction of human rights approaches, more equal footing in decision-making between poorer and richer countries, and by diversifying the country origins of staff members. Today, the urgency of the matter reemerges with realities such as the Black Lives Matter movement and a new geography of poverty shaped by emergent global powers, the COVID-19

¹ Large NGOs are defined as those with an annual expenditure over 100 million British pounds.

crisis, and the climate crisis.

This paper studies the evolution of an NGO in terms of racial equity and decolonization—from what was a UK white-driven, race-blind, and poor-country-oriented charity toward more race-aware and decolonized manifestations of it. “Racial equity” refers to a situation in which race is no longer a statistical predictor of unequal conditions among individuals and groups (CAPD, 2022). Thus, it involves both equal access to resources and equal outcomes from processes. In this article, race equity is understood as addressing three levels of racism—institutionalized (cultural, social and economic barriers); personally mediated (prejudice and behaviours of others); and internalized (own prejudices and behaviours of racialized people) (C. P. Jones, 2000). Thus, racial equity affects racialized and nonracialized individuals, cultural and material aspects. The realization of racial privilege is crucial, since many institutional and mediated decisions are often taken by those in positions of power. This illustrates my own case, as a white person writing about racial justice (see the methodology).

In the context of development NGOs and international relations, racial equity intersects with a second axis of colonialism and coloniality (McEwan, 2018; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). “Colonialism” refers to the process in which some countries exert political control over others through the undemocratic occupation with settlers and the exploitation of economic resources (Rodney, 1972). Further, “coloniality” refers to the unequal patterns of power that emerged because of colonialism and that persist beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. In that sense, decolonization involves democratizing organisations that are racially and geographically unequal. For instance, where decisions are made by white (or even racialized) staff in former colonizing countries. This can take place in development NGOs as well as in international collaborations between governments, companies and universities (e.g., Cascant-Sempere et al., 2022).

The paper starts with a review of two criticisms experienced by development NGOs concerning their racial equity mission. The first criticism explores the human map of *who* decides about work on poverty and development as related to staff’s origin, race, and geography. This often reveals a hierarchy of power relations and decision-making. The second dimension looks at *where* poverty and development work are implemented—whether in the world’s poorest countries or in both poorer and richer countries. It then introduces a framework to analyze both material and discursive aspects in the process of organizational change, in this case, a change process aimed at reaching racial and geographical equity in an organization. It then presents the case of ActionAid, a large UK-born development NGO, which has been considered one of the most radical organizations in the application of human rights and organizational decentralization in the sector (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013; Newman, 2011). The case study approach draws on ethnographic work carried out in Nigeria and the UK in 2013 and 2014, including a review of documents, participant observation, and interviews, which has been complemented with more recent data. Findings explore how the charity made big steps toward racial equity and decolonization when democratizing its structures and decision-making yet how there is still a long road to walk in making racial issues more visible and permanent in its work. This is followed by a debate about implications for the broader development sector.

First Criticism: The Racial and Colonial Legacy in Decision-Making

The development aid sector was born after the Second World War but has its roots in colonial times (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). Some NGOs have been part of anticolonial struggles such as the South African antiapartheid movement (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). Yet, historical, commercial, and linguistic bonds remain between former colonial and colonized countries that are highly unequal—a criticism long raised by critical and postcolonial scholars (e.g., Esteva & Escobar, 2017; Pailey, 2020; Schöneberg, 2016). At the organizational level, development NGOs often

reproduce these inequalities. Strategic resources and decision-making remain racially and geographically unequal, staying in the hands of white staff working for aid donors and large NGOs in headquarters, often based in high-income, former colonizing countries.

In 2021, the UK Parliament ordered a report on “Racism in the Aid Sector” in the UK (IDC, 2022). Results from the 2018 UK Civil Society Almanac published by the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) found that 9% of charity sector staff were from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) (here, “racialized” backgrounds is used, as compared with white backgrounds that are not racialized). This percentage is compared with 12% of the private sector, 11% of the public sector, and 14% of the UK population who are racialized citizens.

Similar results were found for decision-makers. Surveys for 2017–2018 by the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) revealed that racialized senior management teams and trustees represented 10% in the UK charity sector. This percentage went down to 3% for CEOs (Merrylees, 2018). Similarly, another study by the Green Park Foundation (Green Park, 2018) noted that 34 of the UK’s 100 largest charities had all-white senior leadership teams, while only 8% of senior positions were held by ethnic minority leaders. At chair, CEO, and CFO positions, a decrease was again confirmed, i.e., to 6%.

Within the charity sector, the situation of development NGOs was slightly more positive. The Green Park report included a subsector analysis of charities. Animal charities displayed the lowest level of ethnocultural diversity at under 2% of the senior leadership, while NGOs (mainly foreign aid charities) had the highest level of ethnocultural diversity (15.8%) amongst leaders (Green Park, 2018). While this could be read as matching the percentage of racialized population in the UK (14%), some suggest that this percentage should go up to 40%, in line with the racialized population in London, where most of these organizations work (IDC, 2022). It could also be argued that the expected percentage needs to be set higher to reflect the majority percentages of the populations in the countries where these international organizations work. Finally, while development NGOs have a relative fair level of ethnocultural diversity, the analysis does not indicate at which decision-making positions these staff are located. Moreover, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in the UK government, which often has an influence in the development agenda and funding of large organisations, still had 7.5% of racialized senior management in 2022 (IDC, 2022).

Some voices have raised doubts about whether it is correct that staff who may come from UK aid recipient countries take part in funding decisions (IDC, 2022). Yet, surprisingly, it does not apply the same argument on decisions taken by European/UK white decision-makers who may have limited knowledge about these countries.

Other indirect factors may prevent racialized people from accessing decision-making positions. In a study by the British Overseas NGOs for Development organization (BOND), 85% of those who identified as racialized staff in the development sector felt that getting promoted in the sector was not accessible to them; 68% said to have experienced racial discrimination at work within the past year—or had supported someone else who had (Bheeroo et al., 2020). This is despite 73% reporting to have diversity and inclusion policies at work.

A consequence of not accessing decision-making positions is that racialized workers earn less than white people with the same degrees on average (TUC, 2016). Save the Children UK was one of the first large international NGOs to publish its ethnicity pay gap data in 2020 (IDC, 2022). Racialized people in the development sector were paid 5% less based on the mean average while the median pay gap across the country was of 4%. Black women earned a mean average of more than 23% less than White men and 13% less than White women (IDC, 2022).

Second Criticism: The Colonial Legacy in the Mapping of Poverty

In a context of development NGOs, racial equity cannot be read only in national terms, as could be the case of a racialized community in a given country. Its historical connections to colonialism and coloniality and the particular country bonds that emanate from them compel the analysis to take an international, intercountry lens as well.

The original mission of development NGOs is to work on poverty in poor, often former colonized countries, and they continue to do so nowadays. The challenge with this gaze, according to some scholars, is that it makes an epistemic and normative judgement on whose poverty (and development model) is relevant. A process of “othering” the poor takes place where the poor are consistently identified as distant (Pickering-Saqqqa, 2019a). This “othering” has a racial reading, as the “others” were, and are, racialized populations.

Discussions about the unequal geography of development work are not new. Public debate in the UK development sector already questioned whether distinctions made between “poverty here and poverty there” were artificial or not in the early 1970s (Luetchford & Burns, 2003, p. 81–82). This tension has lingered in academia, the news and the third sector for decades (e.g., Gentleman, 2013; P. S. Jones, 2000; Whyte in Lewis, 2015). For instance, a situation of “parallel worlds” happens in which professionals and academics addressing poverty in low-income countries and poverty in high-income countries do not talk to each other, thus limiting comparative learning for improved action against poverty (Lewis, 2009, 2015).

Moreover, if the structure of poverty has changed worldwide, how would it be justified that clear-cut north–south maps of poverty are maintained in the imaginary of development? According to Sumner (2010), new economic powers such as Brazil, China, India, and Russia, most of which are not predominantly white, have now turned donors. World inequality has raised, with few countries and people concentrating more wealth, and middle-income countries now holding most of the bottom billion poor people in the world.

As a result, new understandings in development have emerged that challenge the traditional “global poverty” vision, in which the role of white, richer countries is silent, and poverty solutions are limited to work in the poorest countries, i.e., “poverty there”). For instance, the “blame us” frame illustrates causes of global poverty that are created by rich countries and elites, that require work in both the global north and the global south. An illustration would be denouncing oil spills of multinationals from the global north that ruin the environment in the global south (Vossen & Van Gorp, 2017). Highlighting this responsibility breaks with the colonial past by naming the power of high-income countries. This approach offsets stereotyped frames such as the “bad governance” frame studied by the same authors in which only governments of poor countries are inherently seen as corrupt and responsible, and where development work is only deemed necessary “there” (Vossen & Van Gorp, 2017).

Similarly, the global village frame emphasizes global interconnectedness and is now becoming a mainstream narrative with the sustainable development goals, where the need of rich countries to tackle cross-border aspects and to develop sustainably (e.g., international crime and conflict, climate crisis, and the environment) is required if wealth and development are to be possible for all countries (Vossen & Van Gorp, 2017). This global village frame resonates with the global justice frame (St. Clair, 2006), which considers that all poverties in the world matter regardless of the country, and that common causes such as neoliberal policies cause them, widening the distance between a global elite and the rest. These new frames are in opposition to the vision of global poverty, naturalized in the missions of many development NGOs to end poverty worldwide there where it is most acute.

Table 1 Framework to explore racial and decolonial change in development NGOs

Organizational structures	Organizational culture
Material aspects of organizational change	Cultural aspects of organizational change
• organograms and decision-making • strategic planning • resources and budgets • networks and partnerships	• leadership • comms: language, narratives, visuals • learning: adaptation, training, rewards • practices: values, emotions

Source: own elaboration²

A Framework to Analyze Racial and Decolonial Change in Development NGOs

Development NGOs and other international organizations are “neither straightforward tools of empire or neocolonialism, nor natural instruments for ‘Third World’ liberation” (Muschik, 2022). To avoid teleological and preconceived understandings, it is important to define a framework that enables the analysis of diverse realities. Two categories of analysis are used: material and cultural aspects, which are necessary to achieve racial equity (C. P. Jones, 2000).

Material aspects relate to organizational structures and include organograms, hierarchies of leadership and decision-making, strategic planning, budgets, and the types of networking and partnerships of an organization (Table 1). The number and type of campaigners, volunteers and staff, the creation and demise of teams and departments would also fit in this category.

Cultural aspects relate to the organizational culture and include aspects such as language and narratives and visuals used as well as the daily practices. This category also includes emotions felt, for example, how staff or campaigners feel when it comes to changes related to decolonization. In processes of cultural change, emotional attachments by staff, volunteers, and decision-makers develop (della Porta, 2014). Analyzing emotions such as motivation and diverging voices in an organization helps us to understand how ripe that cultural change may be.

Using this dual framework helps prevent partial visions of what may constitute organizational change, that is, only looking at either cultural or material aspects of (racial) change. For instance, there have been criticisms about seeing the decolonization process in NGOs as a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issue or an HR issue (Green, 2020). This means that decolonizing is not only about hiring staff from different backgrounds and ensuring there is equality in recruitment and inclusion. It implies a change in power relations and decision-making and an acknowledgment of the colonial roots of international development. It involves the whole organization, not only the human resources department. Others have instead criticized how change processes in any organization must address cultural changes, and not only more visible changes in organizational structures (Elbers & Schulpen, 2015). Cultural change is, according to this view, one of the hardest aspects to achieve.

Methodology and the Case of ActionAid

ActionAid was founded in 1972 in the UK as a charity focused on eradicating poverty through child sponsorship and service-delivery.² Today, ActionAid keeps its poverty eradication mission in the poorest countries intact, but its processes and structures have changed. What has made ActionAid different in the eyes of academics and peer organizations has been the radicalness with which internal policies such as human rights and organizational decentralization have been applied (Newman, 2011, ch. 5). The NGO has also stood out for

² For a review of ActionAid’s mission and history, see the evolution of global strategies in Newman (2011, ch. 4)

developing its own popular, community-based version of human rights, which has permeated the local work of the organization (Plipat, 2006). In this study, ActionAid was chosen as an *extreme* case study as human rights and decentralization processes are likely to support decolonization goals—we return to assess the strength of this premise in the discussion. Unlike *paradigmatic* cases that illustrate average features, extreme cases illustrate a phenomenon that has reached an advanced or differential position than similar entities in a given area (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Fieldwork took place in Abuja and London between January 2013 and December 2014. During that period, I compared the ways of working of ActionAid Nigeria and ActionAid UK, and how they implemented programs and campaigns. A key campaign that I observed was the Tax Justice Campaign, an initiative that involved several country teams, including ActionAid Nigeria and ActionAid UK. I interviewed several staff members (see Appendix 1 for a list)

After that period, I analyzed more recent ActionAid campaigns (2021–2023) as presented on the organization’s website and analyzed the narratives used. I reviewed archives, internal reports, and publications. Archives reviewed included the national organizational strategies in Nigeria and the UK, the global strategies (ActionAid’s strategies 2012–2017 and 2018–2028), annual reports (from 2015 to 2021), and mission and vision statements (see Appendix 1).

To strengthen a longer comparative perspective, the primary work I carried out back in 2013 and 2014 was compared with secondary data of other researchers on ActionAid, spanning from 2006 to 2013 (Plipat, 2006; Ebrahim & Gordon, 2010; Newman, 2011; Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013). In Newman’s case (2011), her PhD has archival and ethnographic data since the start of ActionAid as an organization in 1972. I have also compared ActionAid with other development NGOs of similar budget, mission, and size (Findings 1, 2, and 3).

ActionAid’s meso-processes of democratizing organizational structures and decision-making is well documented in the literature, so I mostly used secondary sources for that section (Finding 1). Observation and a review of annual reports, strategies, and media were most useful to study race and decolonization at a more microlevel in programs and campaigns (Findings 2 and 3). A public version of an antiracism audit that ActionAid UK carried out in 2022 was not available at the time of research, nor aggregate statistics on race and staff. Interviews served to explore global poverty as poverty “over there” narratives (Findings 2 and 3).

An advantage and a limitation of this research is that I worked as a consultant for the international offices and some country teams of ActionAid at the time, which gave me insights into the internal ways of working but only partially. Similarly, being a staff member could have helped me in booking certain interviews of staff I did not know personally in the organization. Data selected were reviewed by the interviewees before publication.

Finally, the fact of being white and European gave me more access to higher education and global work opportunities than other racialized people, especially those from low-income countries. This includes the capacity to write papers; being familiar with the academic writing styles, publishing platforms and processes; and being privileged enough to save the time to write and improve a paper after revisions.

Finding 1: Democratizing Structures and Decision-Making Yet Not Racializing Strategic Priorities

ActionAid had been devolving power from the UK to country programs since the early 1990s through partnerships in which local work was transferred to local associations and regionalization with the setup of regional offices (Newman, 2011, ch. 4). These partnership

processes were common at the time in the sector, and ActionAid was at first less ambitious than other NGOs (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013). The breaking point arrived in 2003 when ActionAid turned into a federation through its internationalization process (Newman, 2011).

Until 2003, ActionAid had been led from AAUK, ActionAid's country founder since 1972. Deliberate efforts were made to separate ActionAid, as the federation's headquarters, from AAUK to make the latter just one more country member with a vote (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013). ActionAid registered as a foundation in the Netherlands, and the international headquarters partly moved from London to Johannesburg and other regional hub cities. With this move, ActionAid became the first major UK NGO to have moved from north to south.

Gradually, country programs were nationalized as autonomous associations with national assemblies and national boards accountable to the assemblies³. In 2008, ActionAid mirrored the two-tiered (i.e., assembly-board) system already running nationally at the international level. In 2009, a constitution was enshrined, and the first annual international general assembly took place. From this point onward, African, Asian, American, and European national members could bring motions and directly shape the association's future (Ebrahim & Gordon, 2010). For example, as early as 2010, the affiliate units in Ghana, Greece and Sierra Leone submitted three motions for a vote at the assembly, which could have direct effects in the ways of working of the whole organization, such as which new country members to accept or how to distribute the international budget (Ebrahim & Gordon, 2010).

With the adoption of human rights approaches in the 2000s, ActionAid also started a radical democratization of its international decision-making structures. Country directors and international board members—originally British nationals—gradually diversified (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013). Likewise, ActionAid federation's voting geography changed to give more decision-making power to African, Asian, and Latin-American countries.

In 2010, eight out of 15 of the affiliates (members who double-voted) were high-income countries, while seven were African, Asian, and Latin-American. The affiliate status was formerly reserved to high-income country members. Likewise, half of the 10 associates (members who single-voted) were African, three Asian, and two European (Ebrahim & Gordon, 2010).

In 2015, the number of affiliates had risen to 21, 11 of which were nonhigh-income countries from Africa, Asia, and Latin-America. The six associates, that is, potential future affiliates, were all nonhigh-income countries from Africa and Asia (ActionAid, 2016). This distinguished ActionAid from other NGOs like CARE, Oxfam, and Save the Children at the time (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013). Still, in 2022, all of the 21 Oxfam members were high-income countries except for Brazil, Colombia, India, Mexico, and South Africa (Oxfam, nd).

Additionally, ActionAid sought to decentralize income by setting up national fundraising schemes. By 2015, some nonhigh-income countries had successfully started to mobilize committed income in the federation, i.e., Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, and Thailand (ActionAid, 2017a). This was important, given that most country members still depended financially on high-income (many of which former colonizing) country members, despite all members being autonomous legally and in decision-making processes. Added to this, a financial rule existed stating that no more than 50% of the total budget of an ActionAid member could come from any one governmental or private actor other than ActionAid, to

³ AAUK, ActionAid Ireland and ActionAid US did not have national assemblies at the time (Jayawickrama & Ebrahim, 2013, p. 6)

preserve political autonomy (Ebrahim & Gordon, 2010).

These early efforts in democratizing decision-making and finances have mirrored in the activity of the organization. For instance, countries involved in the Tax Justice Campaign I studied had relative autonomy (and even funding) in planning and implementing the campaign. In Nigeria, the campaign not only had international claims and actions such as tax avoidance from multinational companies sitting in the UK but also national and local ones such as corruption and tax incentives from the Nigerian government to the companies. This enabled ActionAid UK to promote a “blame us” frame while ActionAid Nigeria rooted the campaign in the country. I have studied this in more detail somewhere else (Author, 2022).

At the middle-management level, it is still difficult to find disaggregated data in annual reports about the ethnicity of staff (percentage of staff, percentage of senior positions) in the same way that one can find about the percentage of male/female in staff, volunteers and senior leadership positions (e.g., ActionAid, 2022a) or about the salaries of CEOs and senior leadership (e.g., ActionAid UK, 2022a).

In 2021, ActionAid UK carried out an antiracism audit, which created controversy amongst staff and the media. Some staff felt that evidence of institutional racism had been ignored (ActionAid UK, 2022a). On the other hand, the audit identified “a number of good practice areas” in the charity. For instance, they found that the proportion of Black and ethnic minority staff working at AAUK was higher than the sector average (Hargrave, 2022).

My own experience as a consultant for ActionAid and while doing fieldwork let me observe that the national teams in ActionAid had most staff from the country or region, including CEOs and leadership teams. I could observe this in India, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and South Africa as well as in regional workshops where the presence of white people was scant or inexistent. In Nigeria during fieldwork, I was the only white in the organization when I arrived, and I remember that some staff prided the place for being fully black staffed (ActionAid Nigeria staff, informal chats, 2013–14). Only in 2014, three Asian and European expats started working at ActionAid Nigeria. One could also observe diversity of religions and ethnicities within the staff (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba ...).

Also, it was common practice to have to justify working abroad as an international consultant if a national could do the job. This meant, for instance, that I (and the ActionAid staff contracting me for consultancies) had to justify why a white European like me was taken as an expert. This happened to me twice, when working in India and South Africa.

However, racial equity and decoloniality are far from being an organizational priority or line of work. Long ago, ActionAid decided to focus on women’s rights and to tackle this from different thematic areas such as violence against women, public services, climate justice, and humanitarian work, as seen in its last two global strategies (ActionAid, 2011; ActionAid, 2017b). Similarly, ActionAid’s Nigeria priorities involve emergencies, land and climate, and women’s rights (ActionAid Nigeria, 2018). This orientation has historically relegated racial equity to smaller and more ad hoc initiatives within the organization.

More recently, however, the organization has given the matter more prominence. In its last annual report, ActionAid acknowledged the work of the racial justice movement Black Lives Matter and how it has:

Created a new lens for some of our work, giving energy to a push for decolonisation of the NGO sector and exposing the unacceptable neo-colonial dynamics in international economic relations and the aid sector (ActionAid, 2022a: 7)

Additionally, in 2022, ActionAid prepared and gained a funding call from a large global foundation on racial equity for a total of \$10 million (ActionAid, 2022b). ActionAid presented it as a hopefully growing future line of work:

We had a few significant breakthroughs in raising strategic funds for this programme work, including ... the largest ever grant for anti-racist public education work in Brazil. The collaboration with black, indigenous and Quilombola movements in Brazil and the global mapping of anti-racist education initiatives has opened very exciting new threads of work which can inspire and strengthen similar actions and efforts in other ActionAid's countries and regions (ActionAid, 2022a: 26).

This section has analyzed structures and programs at the global and meso (organizational) level and how they related to race and coloniality. Findings 2 and 3 now move to analyze the microlevel of race and coloniality in the organization's campaigns and programs.

Finding 2: Adapting to New Geographies of Poverty and Activism Worldwide: Work on UK Poverty

Including or not UK poverty in the campaigns and programs of a development NGO has a racial and colonial reading. Seeing poverty elsewhere in other countries is not only a process of othering and distancing oneself from those considered poor, it is also a racial issue as the globally othered, as the poor are mostly racialized, postcolonial populations.

Other reasons relate to better adapting to new geographies of poverty and activism worldwide. On the adaption to the current poverty context, an interviewee commented that:

As poverty moves ... there is so much poverty in middle-income countries, lots of the previous wealthier countries are doing really bad in the recession, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing massively ... I would like to work on structural issues to tackle global inequality and poverty wherever it is (ActionAid UK activism officer, interview 2014).

On activism and campaign coherence, the same interviewee added that certain forms of mobilizing in the UK were undermined, for example, UK campaigners mobilizing against UK poverty besides other campaigners mobilizing against poverty in other countries or UK poor people mobilizing with their own claims:

I really want to be working on development and I love the tax campaign, as it is structural ... [but] I would like us to link more UK and development issues with the tax campaign ... when we are talking about tax, tax pays for important stuff in developing countries, well it pays for important stuff here as well. It has an impact too in the UK, all over the world ... the framing of things in a development way, I understand why ActionAid needs to do it but I would like to frame them as... these are the structures of the world that are causing problems for everyone ... our campaigning ... [is] an act of global justice and an acknowledgement that we are all affected (ActionAid UK activism officer, interview 2014).

This connects with current "we are the 99%" approaches from past global justice and occupy movements, which question the vision of a north-south world with neat divisions between higher- and lower-income countries upon which the global poverty vision has rested. Instead, the 99% frame argues that there is a 1% rich elite versus a 99% of poor people in the world and asks for the poor of all countries to become united against that global elite (Gould-Wartofsky, 2015).

Tensions of not including UK poverty get aggravated in moments of economic crisis and recession. It is when UK poverty levels become more blatant, and when the UK political panorama gets tense, that development NGOs and funding governments face an identity as well as financial crossroad. They may feel obliged to justify why a state's budget is allocated for overseas poverty while cuts are being felt domestically (Green, 2015).

However, there are also disadvantages from working on UK poverty in a development NGO that go beyond the financial costs. According to two interviewees, these have been long-lasting discussions in the sector:

There have been lots of discussion about it [ActionAid UK working in partnerships domestically] and that's never really happened (ActionAid UK youth engagement manager, interview, 2013).

Any international development NGOs that I've worked in, there is this great discussion about how to tie up these things together, but it's still quite tricky (ActionAid UK activism officer, interview 2014).

One such disadvantage is the larger resistance from conservative politicians and media in the UK to claims about austerity "at home" than to the effects of UK politics overseas. This was the case of Oxfam's Perfect Storm initiative in 2014, which questioned the austerity policies of the UK government. A conservative member of Parliament rapidly criticized the NGO for being "too political," and this was followed by an inspection from the Charity Commission (Williams, 2014). Similarly, Save the Children's campaign on children's poverty, It Shouldn't Happen Here, had also received criticism from another conservative member of Parliament who disagreed with the campaign asking for more governmental protection for the poorest families (Elhusseini, 2012).

Other disadvantages of integrating UK poverty raised for the case of Islamic Relief UK regarded the minor appetite from UK individual donors to fund work in the UK as well as the opposition from some members of staff, trustees, and volunteers (Pickering-Saqqqa, 2019b). In fact, it took more than two decades—from 1972 to 1995—and five rounds of consultations for Oxfam to establish its UK poverty program (Pickering-Saqqqa, 2019a). These fundraising issues resonated in ActionAid:

When we work in partnership it's very hard to sacrifice our visibility in a way that we can do in the South, where it doesn't matter if our rally has an ActionAid logo and another logo, and it sounds picky, but ... it is a big issue for organisations in the UK (ActionAid UK youth engagement manager, interview, 2013).

Looking back, ActionAid's initial mission right after its creation in 1972 included social work in lower income countries and in the UK (Newman, 2011). In its first years of operation, ActionAid's goals included UK support for drug addicts and other young people besides the overseas supply of medical staff and equipment and overseas support to children. However, ActionAid abandoned charity work in the UK in the late 1970s, with the notion of "poverty" turning into "poor-country poverty." The next section explores the current situation.

Finding 3: Structural Versus Narrative Approaches to Integrating UK Poverty

In the UK, some development NGOs implement UK poverty programs nowadays [2022]. These include Oxfam (created in 1995), Islamic Relief (created in 2004), and Save the Children (created in 2012) (Butler, 2013; Elhusseini, 2012; Pickering-Saqqqa, 2019b).

ActionAid implements a hybrid approach. Some of its European federation members, such as ActionAid Italy and Solidarity Alliance [ActionAid's partner in Spain], have set up domestic poverty programs. They include campaigning and political action aimed at domestic targets, namely, their governments, such as campaigning for the introduction of a minimum income allowance in Italy, or for the regularization of migrants in Spain (ActionAid Italy, nd: ActionAid-Alianza, nd).

Conversely, ActionAid UK does not implement any UK program or fundraising initiatives to deal with poverty domestically. Its campaigning in the UK is orientated toward having an impact on low-income poverty elimination, not on UK poverty itself. However, ActionAid UK uses a lighter way to include this identity extension without setting up an autonomous program or campaign on UK poverty. This is illustrated more clearly if we move the analysis from the organizational to the campaigning level.

In the Tax Justice Campaign of 2013–2014, ActionAid UK created joint frames and slogans linking all types of poverty. This is a more moderate solution than Islamic Relief, Oxfam, and Save the Children, where poverty frames functioned independently from each other, with autonomous (although similar) campaign targets and demands for the UK and overseas.

For instance, returning to Oxfam's Perfect Storm initiative, Oxfam claimed in it that "lifting the lid on austerity Britain reveals a perfect storm—and it's forcing more and more people into poverty" and that "1% of Britons own the same amount of wealth as 54% of the population. RT [retweet] if you think this is unacceptable" (Williams, 2014). These slogans resonated with the 99% global justice perspective described above. Moreover, they talked about UK poverty autonomously without referring to poverty in lower-income countries.

Similarly, Oxfam Scotland supported a No Evictions for Bedroom Tax petition organized by a partner organization, targeted at the Scottish Parliament for a housing law amendment (Build Scotland, 2013). Likewise, Oxfam asked UK councilors and local councils to "fight cuts to frontline services and make the financial sector pay for the damage it has caused" in its Robin Hood Tax international campaign (Robin Hood Tax, nd). The targets were exclusively UK authorities.

ActionAid UK's take in the Tax Justice Campaign differed to that of Oxfam—the NGO alluded to UK poverty in its campaigning by integrating them into existent developmental frames but did not create autonomous claims with asks to UK authorities⁴. For instance, ActionAid UK's local campaign Towns against Tax Dodging went with the message: "Your [UK] local council has to juggle resources to pay for the essential services in your community, while big companies get away with dodging billions. It's the same in countries like Zambia" (Towns Against Tax Dodging, 2014).

This campaign slogan framed tax justice from a global poverty and global justice perspective. The framing connected both. The first stuck to the mission of a developmental organization that received funding for work in, and on, lower income countries. The second opened up options for collaborations and coalitions beyond development NGOs and the aid sector in the UK. It would also serve to alleviate tensions, especially in moments of UK recession, about which type of poverty is more important to support.

For instance, the latest Tax Justice Campaign chapter in the runup to the UK elections in 2015, the Tax Dodging Bill campaign, was taken up in coalition by development aid organizations like ActionAid UK and Oxfam, and UK national organizations like the National Union of

⁴ During fieldwork, no ActionAid claims like those of Oxfam were observed that were independent and not bridged to poor-country poverty ones.

Figure 1. Example of a global justice angle including a UK perspective.



Source: taxdodgingbill.org.uk

Students and the High Pay Centre. As a slogan read in the campaign: “The Tax Dodging Bill could generate at least £3.6 billion more a year in tax to fight poverty in the UK, and billions more for developing countries” (Tax Dodging Bill, nd). Another example can be seen in Figure 1. This coalition was arguably feasible thanks to a common all-countries poverty or global justice approach that acknowledged and included UK poverty. An exclusive global poverty view would have not fitted well with the noninternational members of the coalition.

More recent campaigns by ActionAid also use global justice narratives. For instance, the women’s rights campaign overall frame is global and includes the UK. Based on events taking place in the USA, the campaign frame drew on the #MeToo Movement for a global call uniting all countries: “from the USA to Malawi: the reach of #MeToo” (ActionAid UK, 2022b). Similarly, a petition to end violence at work against women and LGBT+ people, gave examples in Ghana, Jordan, and the UK, thus making this challenge visible also in the UK. For instance, it acknowledges that “in Jordan, one in five women experienced one or more forms of violence in the workplace” and that “in the UK, more than half of all women and 68% of LGBTQIA+ people and 68 % of disabled women reported being sexually harassed at work” (ActionAid UK, 2021a).

Another recent campaign on climate justice also included three country campaign cases, one of which was European: “The world is in the midst of a climate crisis. We’re seeing extreme heatwaves, floods and storms from China to Germany to Cambodia—but not everyone is equally equipped to deal with them” (Action Aid UK, 2023). In its campaigning style, the organization ensured that “We’re committed to intersectional feminist, anti-racist and trans-inclusive campaigns for justice” (Action Aid UK, 2023).

A third campaign petition against the Illegal Migration Bill also connected the UK with countries like Rwanda, this time, in a blame us frame style rather than in a horizontal, global justice one like the two mentioned above: “The bill effectively ends the right to claim asylum in the UK, and allows for people fleeing war, persecution and humanitarian ... to be detained indefinitely without their case ever being heard. They could even be deported back to the country they have escaped or be sent to Rwanda” (Action Aid UK, 2021b).

These examples break with the cliché that high-income countries do not need to *develop*. Making them visible and part of the problem moves away from “othering” those countries who need to change—a vestige of coloniality (Luetchford & Burns, 2003; Pickering-Saqqqa, 2019a). In some cases, high-income countries will be located as one more case to be compared, as one

more country that needs to improve its development, as one more country in face of common world challenges such as pandemics, classism and racism—the global justice frame. In other cases, high-income countries will be studied for the effects their policies have on lower-income countries—the blame us frame.

However, there are limitations to the extent to which this narrative approach can stretch. When it comes to more demanding coalitions, actions, and resource mobilizing, choices need to be made between assigning resources and funding to one or another perspective. An ActionAid UK activism officer reflected:

There've been quite strong links between them [UK Uncut, a UK grassroots movement] and ActionAid ... but they're much more focused on the UK and services being cut, and we can't really talk about that ... we do quite a little bit but ... our mandate is to work on development issues, that means overseas (ActionAid UK activism officer, interview 2014).

In fact, organizational structures in ActionAid UK strictly stuck to a global poverty vision, i.e., the human resources invested in UK activism, such as an activism officer, were oriented toward supporting actions focused on poverty elsewhere, not UK poverty. Similarly, there were 60,000 ActionAid UK campaigners at the time of research (AAUK campaign engagement manager, interview, 2014). Of these, 15,000 would take frequent online action, and less than 50 would take more time-consuming street action in a go. UK campaigners could choose which campaign action to do but not the theme or target, for instance, UK themes or targets.

I can do participatory sort of training and activity planning, but I can't allow the young people ... to decide what campaigns we are going to run ... the policy and campaigns team decides what are going to be the key issues (ActionAid UK youth engagement manager, interview, 2013).

Additionally, she reflected on the difficulty of mobilizing UK youth from marginalized backgrounds, working youth and school and college students: “If you want to reach young people outside the university then you have to invest in more ... and that is not something that in the UK we are set up to do” (ActionAid UK youth engagement manager, interview, 2013).

Conversely, Oxfam and Save the Children had staff posts and structures around UK poverty, which involved some level of autonomous mobilizing and campaigning. For instance, Save the Children once asked the public to donate specifically to a UK poverty program aiming to raise £500,000—although it was not specified if part of this would go to campaigning or rather be directed to service-delivery program (Elhusseini, 2012).

The fact that ActionAid UK is a significant fundraiser in ActionAid's federation may have affected its freedom to be more openly political in the UK space. ActionAid's tax justice campaigner (pers. comms., 2016) noted that more high-income country members in Europe and beyond may opt for these changes in the future, as is already the case in other ActionAid country members such as Italy, and that this will necessarily go hand in hand with a shift to fundraising in low and middle-income country members.

Discussion: Decolonizing Organisations, Implications for the Wider Development Sector

To what extent has ActionAid turned decolonized and racially egalitarian? And what can be learned from the case? The NGO took steps in material and cultural aspects. It had a substantial and early progress on the structural and decision-making front that was global (materials aspects). As seen, it changed its decision-making structure drastically at the highest

level and partly at the middle management level. This permeated in the relative decentralized and autonomous decision-making of each country member, for example, in initiatives such as the Tax Justice Campaign. Thus, global decentralization is key for the decolonization of an organisation besides human resource issues addressing racial equity in UK headquarters.

However, there has been little talk about racial equity in the organization until quite recently. Also, the existence of programs and campaigns specifically addressing racial equity is still emergent (cultural aspects). Strategic priorities have not been racialized, as seen in organizational strategies and annual reports. Then, claims about UK's responsibility in someone else's poverty (blame us approach) and about UK poverty are present in ActionAid's work. Yet, for UK poverty and other UK development aspects such as climate change and gender violence, this takes place at the narrative level of campaigns (global justice approach) more than at the organizational or structural level. This limits potential alliances when it comes to street mobilization, as few or no partnerships (in the UK) exist beyond the narrative.

For all these reasons, we can conclude that the development NGO is less of an *extreme* case than what was expected initially, compared with other NGOs. The organization went beyond changes in headquarters and challenged unequal international structures that related to race and colonialism. In this respect, it is advanced compared with other NGOs in the sector. Yet, these historic advances are only part of the struggle to decolonize an organization, and there is still work to be done.

All in all, the case leaves several learnings. First, that taking a moderate approach is better than nothing. For instance, for the issue of having UK programs, or UK campaigns with UK targets, this is probably not a viable option for many NGOs in the sector. If this is the case, then the narrative approach is a fair enough alternative that acknowledges the need to address failures in the development models for all countries. Be it with a lighter narrative approach (ActionAid UK) or with a stronger structural one (ActionAid Italy and ActionAid Spain), the case demonstrates that the original mission of an organization (that of supporting the world's poorest) can expand without necessarily diminishing the identity of the organization, and that these expansions that address tensions may precisely benefit the original mission.

Second, it is hard to draw a line from which to dictate whether an organization has decolonized and become racially egalitarian. There is no magic bullet, as each organization departs with diverse starting points. Overall, the case shows that a mixture of cultural and material aspects becomes necessary to lead in the right direction of change, including: 1) equality of votes amongst the richer and poorer country members (which are also racialized); 2) diverse staff proportional and representative of the population in each country; 3) programs on racial equity; and/or 4) campaigns that disclose the responsibilities of donor, high-income countries on other countries (blame us approach) as well as their own development challenges such as poverty, gender violence, or climate change (global justice approach). Overall, if development work is to become more decolonial and egalitarian, nonracialized staff and high-income countries will need to give away power and be within the picture, not behind it.

Disclosure Statement

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Author Biographies

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APPENDIX 1

List of Documents Used

- ActionAid's Strategy 2012–2017 – People's Action to End Poverty
- ActionAid's Strategy 2018–2028 – Action for Global Justice
- ActionAid Nigeria's Strategy 2018–2023 – Social Justice to End Poverty
- ActionAid Annual Reports 2015 to 2021
- ActionAid UK Annual Report 2021
- Towns Against Tax Dodging Campaign, 2014 (website no longer available)
- ActionAid UK Campaigns, 2021–2023 (on website)

List of Interviews (between 40-90 minutes)

- ActionAid UK youth engagement manager, interview, 2013
- ActionAid UK campaign engagement manager, interview, 2014
- ActionAid UK activism officer, interview, 2014
- ActionAid's tax justice campaigner, pers. comms., 2016
- ActionAid and ActionAid UK staff, interviews, 2013–14
- ActionAid Nigeria staff, informal chats, 2013–14