



# Discussing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Humanitarian Sector

## Landscaping Workshop Summary

### 2020 Update

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#### Background

Advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in a meaningful and measurable way is a strategic priority for the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI) both for internal practices and for the humanitarian field, in general. Recent attention to diversity and inclusion practices in the humanitarian sector has motivated many organizations to begin addressing persistent challenges related to bias and discrimination. A need for more diverse representation in humanitarian organizations and decision-making has been elevated at high-level fora and formalized in commitments such as the Charter for Change on the Localization of Humanitarian Aid. This acknowledgement brings with it a unique opportunity to more critically assess diversity and inclusion priorities for humanitarian practitioners and the communities they serve. Key topics for consideration include: perceptions related to increasing diversity and inclusion; institutional mechanisms for accountability; current funding and resources allocated to increasing dialogue and awareness; and how to keep this dialogue a priority amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.



## Workshop Summary

In an effort to better understand current priorities and undertake a preliminary exploration of understandings related to diversity and inclusion initiatives, HHI engaged in two activities between 2019 and 2020: a set of informational interviews and an interactive workshop. The goal of both activities was to collect initial input on key challenges humanitarian practitioners tasked with designing and implementing DEI efforts currently face, and to incorporate the preliminary findings in HHI's future plans to promote diversity, and equity. Themes from the workshop and exploratory interviews may be used to inform future DEI efforts and discussions at HHI, and are being shared publicly as a resource for other institutions to review.

The academic roundtable titled “*Opportunities for Increasing Diversity and Inclusion in the Humanitarian Sector*” took place online on May 21, 2020. Roundtable participants (RPs) included 28 practitioners from a cross-section of local humanitarian agencies, UN agencies, NGOs, International Organizations, academic institutions, advocacy groups, and research centers. Annex I illustrates the workshop agenda. Convened during the COVID-19 pandemic, this roundtable was held online via Zoom video and consisted of plenary and breakout group discussions.

The design and topics for the roundtable were informed by prior informal interviews with 14 key informants (KIs) with expertise on DEI issues, conducted between 2019 and early 2020. Sample quotes from the interviews were shared with workshop RPs and can be found in Annex 1. The workshop breakout sessions addressed: The Localization Agenda, Safety and Security, Impunity and Accountability, and Organizational Behavior and Buy-In. HHI is grateful to all practitioners who participated in an informational interview or the roundtable, and summaries of the topics and conversations from each roundtable session are given below.

### The Localization Agenda

While the 2016 Grand Bargain pledged to move 25% of all humanitarian funding through local and national actors by 2020, RPs and KIs discussed a number of realities of the humanitarian sector that seemed to undermine this ambition. The increasing practice of remote management of humanitarian operations (even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic) has transferred a number of operational risks to local partners, while an insistence on using systems and policies that present unnecessary technical, administrative, and/or financial challenges to smaller, local organizations has continued. Both KIs and RPs commented on the importance of acknowledging how international aid workers—typically identified in interviews and the roundtable as aid workers who are white and from the Global North—may inadvertently reinforce structural inequalities in local contexts due to a lack of knowledge regarding local hierarchies and norms and their outsized power in humanitarian decision-making. Other RPs acknowledged that remote management also plays a role in international aid workers not seeing a full picture of the myriad considerations necessary for contextually accurate humanitarian decision-making. If international agencies do not appropriately understand the diversity of local actors within a given crisis, they may overlook pre-existing hierarchies and inequalities when making funding decisions. This can in turn alter power dynamics among local actors. While some believe the existing humanitarian architecture is an integral part of aid disbursement, many RPs commented on the importance of a long-term view that aims to phase out the current aid paradigm in favor of locally-led responses.



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### Safety and Security

While work in the humanitarian sector necessarily brings an expected level of insecurity, recruiting and retaining aid workers from diverse backgrounds requires thoughtful safety and security protocols that can be adapted across a host of identity vectors. Organizations have a duty of care toward individual aid workers, which may require that equal consideration be given to the unique challenges each practitioner may face while performing their jobs, and adequately accounting for that uniqueness in planning and protection measures. RPs also noted that codes of conduct and procedures generated at the headquarters level may not be readily accepted at country-level offices due to cultural considerations. A string of high-profile revelations, particularly since 2017, have exposed the need for increased attention and funding for Protection against Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH), this ongoing discourse presents an opportunity to build upon initial research findings and deepen industry dialogue on not only PSEAH, but also other forms of bias and discrimination that can impact individual aid worker security.

### Impunity and Accountability

A lack of transparency or visible precedent around the processes and outcomes for reporting harassment, discrimination, or abuse in the humanitarian sector consistently contributes to encouraging impunity for perpetrators and retaliation against whistleblowers. Debates around duty of care combined with high levels of turnover also exacerbate challenges surrounding the protection of aid workers and beneficiaries alike.

RPs indicated that, despite recent adaptations of reporting systems, aid workers are still not reporting harassment, discrimination, or abuse at levels that match the numbers of incidents they believe are actually occurring—a challenge faced not only by the humanitarian sector, but by workplaces globally. This disconnect was attributed at least in part to a fundamental mistrust in agencies to properly address complaints. While organizations may outwardly express a willingness to change reporting systems to better comply with legal and donor-driven demands, a number of constraints serve as barriers to internal compliance and accountability. RPs pinpointed a number of barriers to speaking up and particularly elevated the issue of asymmetrical power relations amongst staff. This challenge may be most acute for local staff who live in countries with limited livelihood opportunities outside of working for a humanitarian organization. Because of this, local staff may have reason to be more fearful of reporting incidents like racial discrimination from international staff—an example that several RPs mentioned. Unclear information about reporting and accountability outcomes, an absence of transparency, and a lack of visible, predictable patterns for how cases are treated all contribute to a fundamental lack of trust in reporting systems. RPs also noted that organizations have a very poor track record of adequately responding to allegations, which could lead survivors to self-select out of the reporting process not only for fear of reprisal, but also for fear of going through the reporting process to ultimately receive little to no justice or accountability.

### Organizational Behavior and Buy-In

A consistently discussed dynamic was the challenge of addressing system-wide organizational norms and behaviors. RPs noted that the humanitarian sector struggles to complement the immediacy required by operational realities with sustainable, long-term institutional planning. In this context, most of those tasked with leading diversity and inclusion efforts noted frustration at not receiving the appropriate amounts of funding and/or resources essential for scaling interventions and programming to the required need. Many of the roles created to address diversity and inclusion programming are short-term,



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unsustainably funded, not funded, and/or consultancy positions, contributing to instability that inherently leads to a lack of integration across programming—as those who accept these roles are often not conferred enough authority to make effective, long-term decisions. RPs raised the issue of consistent barriers to the recruitment of diverse staff, including academic and experiential credentials that do not account for local expertise. Some organizations’ reliance on only one person to lead their diversity and inclusion work, instead of developing systems for shared responsibility, was cited by RPs as a serious hindrance with potential to undermine work that has already been done.

RPs expressed the hope that they would see a cultural shift and reframing of norms in the humanitarian sector through visible benchmarks such as increased parity and diversity across all positions; more honest conversations amongst staff on the challenges and opportunities associated with diversity and inclusion; more training and commitment to continued dialogue; and increased accountability and protection for those who report bias, discrimination, harassment, or assault.

When discussing opportunities for enacting change on these fronts, technical leadership was cited repeatedly as a critical area for growth. Systems for reporting abuse need to be streamlined. HR and recruitment platforms need to be re-coded to represent a diversity of identity vectors. Data on race, disability, or other markers for potential discrimination may need to be collected and consistently reviewed to create inclusive programming that is specific to an organization’s needs.

### Key Challenges

Looking forward, some of the key challenges that RPs discussed in the breakout groups include:

- Current diversity and inclusion programming is often unsustainably funded, not funded, and/or the responsibility of an external consultant or “volunteer” staff member
- Those tasked with diversity and inclusion programming may not be empowered with the levels of decision-making authority necessary to engender sustainable change
- A “culture of fear” in the humanitarian sector makes discussions about diversity and inclusion difficult, as practitioners are anxious about making mistakes or facing penalties for speaking up
- Extremely low levels of trust exist in current reporting mechanisms and systems designed to protect survivors and whistleblowers from facing punitive professional consequences
- The localization of humanitarian aid faces a combination of the challenges listed above, including structural and institutional racism, that negatively impact the transfer of power and decision-making



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## Annex 1. Workshop Agenda

9:00 am – 9:30 am	Welcome to Roundtable and Participant Introductions  <b>Dr. Michael VanRooyen</b> Director Harvard Humanitarian Initiative
9:30 am – 10:00 am	“Opportunities for Increasing Diversity and Inclusion in Humanitarian Action” Presentation by: <b>Meredith Blake</b> Research Coordinator Program on Gender, Rights and Resilience (GR2) Harvard Humanitarian Initiative
10:00 am – 10:40 am	<b>Breakout Groups:</b>  <i>Increasing Diversity and Inclusion in:</i> #1: The Localization Agenda #2: Safety and Security #3: Impunity and Accountability #4: Organizational Behavior and Buy-In
10:40 am – 10:45 am	Break
10:45 am – 11:30 am	Plenary Report Back from Breakout Groups
11:30 am – 12:00 pm	“Diversity and Humanitarian Negotiation”  Presentation by: <b>Reem Alsalem</b> Independent Consultant Global Humanitude <i>and</i> <b>Rob Grace</b> Graduate Research Fellow Program on Negotiation, Harvard Law School
12:00 pm – 12:30 pm	Wrap up, next steps, and closing reflections



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### **Acknowledgements**

Meredith Blake, Research Coordinator, Gender, Rights and Resilience (*former*) planned the workshop and drew upon informational interviews and facilitator notes to contribute to this summary.

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