

Tools for anti-racism in the Belgian NGO sector

Concluding Research Report

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Structure

1. Methodology

- ☐ Research process
- ☐ NGOs
- ☐ Participants

2. Key Findings (4)

- ☐ Experiences with racism among BIPOC Employees
- ☐ Conceptual Interpretations and Perceptions: Diversity, Decolonization and Anti-Racism
- ☐ Internal Barriers Undermining Anti-Racism Efforts
- ☐ Structural Challenges Impacting Anti-Racism Efforts

Recommendations and implementation → Levl vzw

Methodology

A.Methods

- Literature review & Policy Analysis
- 34 Semi-structured interviews
 - 7 preliminary phase
 - 27 main phase
- Focus:
 - Lived experiences with (structural) racism
 - Organizational responses
 - Leadership & HR perspectives on addressing (structural) racism

B. NGO Sampling

- 11 NGOs
- Sampling criteria - diversity in terms of:
 - ☐ Thematic areas
 - ☐ Historical background (generations)
 - ☐ Blend Belgian + International
 - ☐ Focus regions:
 - Great Lakes, Africa
 - Asia and the Middle East
 - ☐ Level of engagement with DEI, anti-racism and decolonization

C. Research Participants Sampling

- 34 research participants
- For each NGO:
 - ☐ BIPOC employees based in Belgium
 - ☐ BIPOC employees based in country office
 - ☐ Leading officers
 - ☐ HR officers
- Overlap between categories

C. Research Participants Sampling

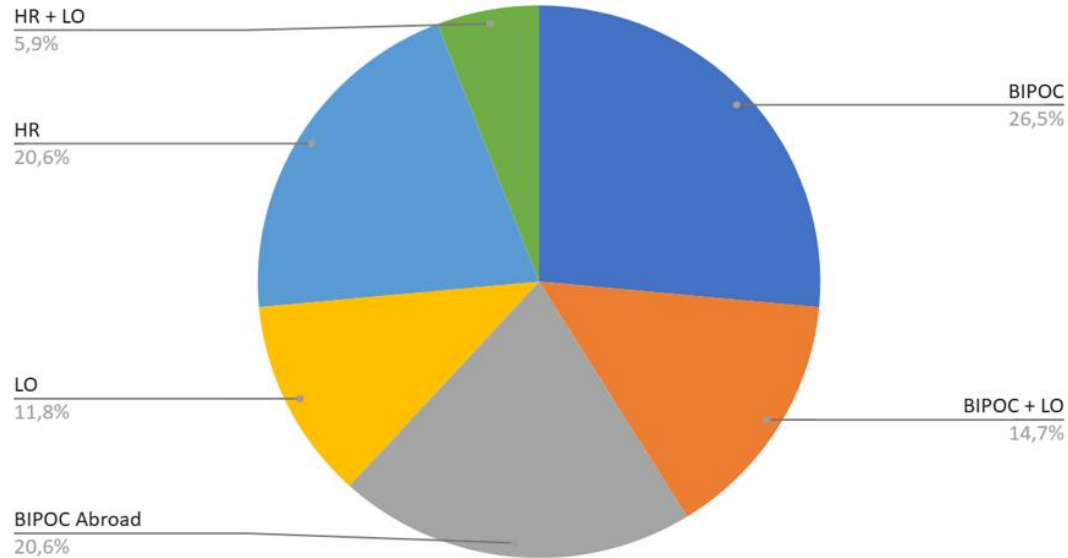
Table 1: Number of respondents by position

Respondent Category	N
BIPOC employee	9
BIPOC employee + Leading Officer (BIPOC + LO)	5
BIPOC employee abroad	7
Leading officer (LO)	4
Human resources officer (HR)	7
Human resources office and Leading officers (HR + LO)	2
Total	34

C. Research Participants Sampling

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents by position

Respondent Categories



I. Experiences with racism among BIPOC Employees

Key Findings



" A [nationality] colleague had an issue with his supervisor. And then some colleagues said, maybe he has issues with female authority because he's a Muslim (...) Soon it turned out that more people had issues with her management style, but he was the one who spoke up about it. But (...) if someone else had a problem, they would not point out his religion or his background or his ethnicity because that really didn't matter... it's not the first thing you should think about when there is an issue or a conflict at the office"

A. Micro-Aggressions and Everyday Racism

- Assumptive role-attribution
 - BIPOC=lower-status or obeying role
- Cultural clichés (clothes, accents, token, etc.)
- Intersectionality: multiple identity axes
- Repetition and normalization
 - Minor misunderstanding ≠ Symptom of structural inequality



"When I first tried to apply for an international position, to become a Country Director in [African region], that's when I started feeling that the process was not fair. I had the impression the organization wanted only white people in those positions, because they could use their cultural similarity with donors."

B. Experiences with Recruitment and Advancement

- Recruitment practices opaque and exclusionary
 - Apply multiple times, through back doors, network, etc.
- Work harder to prove oneself
 - Lack of recognition of merit → legitimacy VS quotas
 - Intersectionality → avoid confirming stereotypes
- Promotion and advancement limited
 - Lack of transparency and feedback → subjective & informal



"Generally speaking, [the board] is totally 100% European or Western... We had one person from [a North American country], and one who looks [non-white] but grew up in Belgium. So the board is not diversified. At the HQ in Belgium, I remained the only Black person... During my time I saw efforts to diversify, especially after Black Lives Matter. We had colleagues from [Arab and African backgrounds]... but many didn't stay long. The office currently does not reflect diversity."

C. Diversity Management and Leadership Positions

- Recurring theme: senior and leadership roles white European
 - Diversity celebrated symbolically but absent from power centers
 - Racialized idea of legitimacy
 - Lack of credibility and mission alignment
 - Gap = Vicious cycle
- BIPOC leaving fast → retention problem
- Gap: racial equality overshadowed by other agendas
 - E.g.: Gender
- Outstanding role of BIPOC leaders
 - Can transform organizational culture
 - Single way of seeing → isolation & overjustification



"People don't trust the system... colleagues share frustrations among themselves instead of going to the platform which exists. They say, you never know who's on the other side of the line"

D. Coping and Resistance Mechanisms of BIPOC Employees

- Silence
 - Difficulty of identifying, naming or proving racism
 - Fear of damaging one's reputation or career or being labelled as troublemaker
 - Mistrust in formal reporting system
- Direct confrontation
- Change strategy
 - Make decolonization more digestible
 - Allies

II. Conceptual Interpretations and Perceptions in the NGO Sector: On Diversity, Decolonization and Anti-Racism

Key Findings



"If you ask about racism, people start talking about gender, disability or education level. Race is the hardest thing to put on the agenda."

A. Interpretations and Perceptions of Racism

- Perception: racism & NGO mission incompatibility
- Racism not named directly
 - Humor, misunderstandings, etc.
- Discussions displaced to other types of inequality
 - Gender, disability, etc.
- Individual issue VS Organizational
 - Policy VS concrete measures



"...my thing is a bit, that it's often, this is a survey about racism, but inclusion is much, much wider. It also has to do with disabled people. And so we even mentioned in that vacancy paragraph that we always will try to make reasonable adaptations if need be for physical challenges or for physical disabilities."

B. Interpretations and Perceptions of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Narrow, vague, depoliticized and inconsistent understanding
- Discomfort
 - Shift to other categories of difference (gendered, socio-economic, etc.)
 - Skepticism from BIPOC: abstract, jargon-heavy and disconnected from organizational practices



"In the collective imagination, when you are not a researcher or an activist, decolonization is tightly linked to the Belgian colonization of Congo. People do not understand that those dynamics apply to other people and contexts nowadays".

C. Interpretations and Perceptions of Decolonization

- Contested and misinterpreted
 - Historically irrelevant (past), overly politicized (activism), incompatible with NGOs → failed application
- Gap formal commitments VS actual structure
 - → Responsibility of BIPOC

III. Internal Barriers Undermining Anti-Racism Efforts within the NGO Sector

Key Findings



"Whenever we complain about the lack of diverse staff, we are told that they hire employees based on their skills and competence. And that it's not their fault if BIPOC candidates do not make it."

A. Tensions between DEI Efforts and Organizational Expectations

- Burden: Allocation of time, staff or resources
- Criteria for recruitment
 - Education & professional skills ≠ addressing structural inequalities
- Language policies
 - Disruptive, costly disruptive to smooth operations



"It is a big responsibility for BIPOC employees to have to carry out anti racism efforts all by themselves to change their conditions - conditions that are caused by organizational dysfunctions. It is absolutely exhausting and it shouldn't be their job to do. We should look more into allyship and what the organizations must do to improve the situation"

B. Absence of Organizational Processes

- Policy documents and formal mechanisms poorly communicated
 - → rarely known or used
- Financial limitations
- Reliance on voluntary and unpaid labour/initiatives
 - BIPOC impacted disproportionately



"You have to talk to your direct colleague. It is not because she was elected as the trust person that she really is for you the trust person... It's small teams, it doesn't give that safety and there's also no training about it."

C. Dysfunctional Mechanisms and Policies

- Mistrust in reporting mechanisms
 - ☐ Doubting their fairness, efficiency, capacity
 - ☐ Retaliation or negative career consequences
 - ☐ Narrow focus on sanctions
- Inefficiency of trust-person mechanism
 - ☐ Undertrained
 - ☐ Interpersonal relations overlapping with pro hierarchies
- Flawed anti-racist training
 - ☐ Sporadic
 - ☐ Optional
 - ☐ Disconnected from continuous L&D & colonial history
 - ☐ Collective spaces positive: umbrella organizations

IV. Structural Challenges Impacting Anti-Racism Efforts in the Belgian NGO sector

Key Findings



"We have very limited resources, as you know, and on top of that, the sector is in financial crisis... So, clearly, we lack the means, I mean the resources to be able to free up time to work on these issues. So unfortunately, it always comes second because we have to keep the business running, pay salaries, draw up contracts."

A. Finances and Budget Constraints

- Beyond the control of NGOs
- Most frequent barrier
- Does not exempt from anti-racist work
 - → small actions to signal commitment
 - Alternatives
- Funding opportunities as leverage
- Unequal funding schemes
 - Belgian favored over Majority-World partner



"We work closely with US stakeholders. Which means we don't use the term decolonization, but DEI instead. However, because of Trump's election and his repression on DEI initiatives, we had to minimize the use of that word and take it down from our website".

B. Changing Political and Cultural Opportunity Structures

- Political climate
 - BLM: window for action
 - Far right: forces strategy

C. NGO Status and Nature

- Pression to remain neutral / avoid controversy
- Constraints
- Failure of one-size-fits all approach
 - → organizational tailor-made



"I was promoted from one of our African offices to work in Belgium. The administrative hassle was so heavy and unbearable that my employers decided that they would no longer hire non-Europeans to work in our European offices in the future. They said I was the very last".

D. Restrictive Migration Policies

- Administrative burden of visa procedures for non-European
 - Restricted mobility, long and short term
 - Unequal opportunities

C. Lack of Central Coordinating Body

- Deficit in specialized personnel support
 - E.g.: central contact point for expertise
- Solution: government/state advocacy

Thank you!