

Tools for anti-racism in the Belgian NGO sector

Concluding Research Report

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Executive Summary

The research report “Tools for anti-racism in the Belgian NGO sector” examines how structural racism and colonial legacies continue to shape the Belgian NGO (Non-Governmental Organizations) sector, with a specific focus on workplace dynamics, organizational practices and external influences. Furthermore, the report assesses which existing measures are effective, as well as where important gaps remain. **Its central aim is to provide practical and accessible tools that enable NGOs to strengthen their antiracism efforts in a feasible and sustainable manner.**

Approach and methods

The report is based on a multi-level research focusing on:

- Micro level: everyday experiences of BIPOC employees.
- Meso level: internal organizational practices related to recruitment, promotion, training, governance and complaint systems.
- Macro level: external structural barriers such as funding regimes, donor requirements, and migration policies.

The study is multi-method and includes:

- A comprehensive review of academic literature on structural racism in organizations and specifically the NGO sector.
- A policy analysis identifying existing measures and best practices in combatting structural racism and coloniality throughout the NGO sector, as well as the collection of policy-oriented literature from a) neighboring countries, b) countries that operate in comparable conditions, and c) international organizations and agencies.
- 34 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted across 11 Belgian NGOs and Institutional Actors (IA), including:
 - a) BIPOC employees at different hierarchical levels;
 - b) HR officers;
 - c) senior management and leadership staff.

The qualitative design allows for an in-depth understanding of organizational culture, (in)formal practices, and lived experiences.

Key findings

1. Everyday racism and organizational culture
 - Racism in Belgian NGOs is rarely overt, but manifests through everyday micro-aggressions, cultural stereotyping and implicit assumptions.
 - These practices accumulate over time, creating environments of self-monitoring, emotional labor, and exhaustion for BIPOC staff.
 - Intersectional dynamics matter: race interacts with gender, religion, and migration status, shaping how exclusion is experienced.
2. Recruitment, retention, and advancement
 - NGOs may succeed in recruiting a more diverse workforce at entry or field levels, but retention and promotion remain major bottlenecks.
 - Leadership, management and board positions remain overwhelmingly white and European reinforcing racialized hierarchies of authority.
 - Advancement is often shaped by non-transparent procedures, and donor-driven notions of legitimacy and professionalism.
3. DEI, racism and decolonization

- DEI is the most commonly used language to address inequality, but is often:
 - Reduced to gender equality, internationalization, or broad non-discrimination clauses.
 - Treated as an administrative or symbolic commitment rather than structural transformation.
 - Explicit discussions of racism and whiteness are frequently avoided or displaced by broader inclusion narratives.
 - Decolonization is widely perceived as:
 - A historical issue rather than a contemporary organizational concern.
 - Too political or activist-driven for internal organizational change.
4. Mechanisms and policies
- Many NGOs lack:
 - Clear anti-racism policies
 - Transparent and well-communicated complaint procedures
 - Where systems exist, trust is low, leading employees to rely on informal coping strategies.
 - Anti-racism efforts depend heavily on individual goodwill.
5. Structural external barriers:
- Funding constraints and the priorities of governments and donors, limit long-term investment in anti-racist work. In addition, organizations that invest only for short periods or on a sporadic basis - sometimes also limited by the reasons just mentioned - further limit the opportunities and overall impact of anti-racism efforts.
 - Migration and visa regimes disproportionately restrict the mobility and career progression of non-European staff.

Key Recommendations

- NGOs should move beyond ad hoc responses to micro-aggressions by embedding anti-racism into training, onboarding, leadership responsibilities, and organizational culture.
- NGOs should review job criteria, use anonymized screening, assess anti-racist awareness in interviews, and adopt positive action measures to correct persistent underrepresentation, especially in leadership.
- Reporting systems should be independent, trustworthy, and clearly communicated, complemented by exit interviews as an additional feedback channel on racism and exclusion.
- NGOs should leverage existing gender-equality frameworks, improve communication about available tools, and collectively advocate for funding models and migration policies that enable anti-racist efforts.

What the Toolkit Provides

- A practical set of tools organized in a roadmap that connects the theoretical framework of the report to concrete, step-by-step application.
- It includes checklists, questionnaires, examples of good practices, and working methods, all aimed at supporting organizational policy development.
- The toolbox is specifically designed for HR and leadership, within organizations as well as at the sector level, to facilitate the structural embedding of anti-racism measures, processes, and regulations.
- The toolbox follows the thematic structure of this report, focusing on the four key areas.

Introduction

The Belgian sector of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has long positioned itself as a key actor in the promotion of human rights, equality, and social justice worldwide. Yet, recent debates around anti-racism and decolonization have shown that organizations that advocate for global justice are not immune to reproducing inequalities within their own structures. In the wake of social movements such as Black Lives Matter and ongoing global crises that have exposed unequal solidarities, such as the genocide in Gaza, NGOs have been pressured to question the persistence of colonial hierarchies and racism in their internal operations. However, translating these reflections into concrete organizational change remains a challenging and uneven process. This report is situated within that ongoing conversation. It provides an in-depth analysis of how racism, decolonization, and diversity are understood, enacted and constrained within the Belgian NGO sector, and provides recommendations on how to tackle these issues across the sector.

The study includes analysis of existing policies and commitments and their implementation, but it is mostly focused on the lived realities of employees in diverse positions and with different positionalities, and in particular BIPOC employees. This emphasis allows to reveal the daily practices, internal hierarchies and institutional mechanisms that shape who is heard, who advances, and who is valued. It is based on 34 semi-structured interviews with staff from 11 NGOs and Institutional Actors (IAs), including BIPOC staff, HR officers, and members of senior management. Through these voices, the report captures both the visible and invisible dimensions of racism and anti-racism in the NGO sector. On the one hand, BIPOC staff's daily experiences are impacted by micro-aggressions and stereotypes, and their employment and career opportunities within the NGO sector are impacted by structural barriers in recruitment, representation, and leadership. On the other hand, it sheds light on how organizational mechanisms, such as complaint systems, DEI policies, and anti-racism training, reveal a gap between institutional commitments and effective practice.

The research report concludes the main insight of the empirical study. It begins with introducing the methodological decisions made to establish this study, paying particular attention to sample and respondent selection, and ethical considerations. It then moves to present the key findings of the study, combining insights from our review of the existing literature, our analysis of the existing policies in the sector, and mainly relying on the analysis of the in-depth interviews we have conducted. The presentation of the findings is organized around four themes, moving from the micro to the macro level:

- 1) Everyday experiences with racism that individual BIPOC employees in the NGO sector encounter.
- 2) Individual perspectives among the broader workforce of the NGO sector. A main focus of this section is on how the concepts of racism and anti-racism, DEI, and decolonization, are interpreted in the sector, and how these perceptions impact BIPOC lived experiences and anti-racism efforts.
- 3) Organizational and cross-organizational barriers undermining anti-racism efforts within the NGO sector.
- 4) Broader, structural barriers that extend beyond the organizational and even the sectoral level, highlighting some concrete issues around which NGOs and umbrella organizations can advocate in order to enhance their anti-racism efforts.

It should be noted that the second section elaborates on one particular and timely case that surfaced in the majority of interviews as an example of prevalent perceptions in the sector, and that is how the genocide in Gaza was perceived, discussed and represented within NGOs. We chose to highlight this theme, which was not initially included in our analytical objectives, as its continuous emergence during the interviews revealed that it significantly shaped BIPOC employees' experiences in the sector.

Next to each of these four themes, we provide key recommendations for NGOs seeking to embed

and improve anti-racist and decolonizing work within their organizations and within the sector more broadly. These thematic recommendations are integrated into a holistic set of recommendations that is presented at the conclusion of this report. The report is accompanied by a toolkit that provides concrete practical tools to support NGOs in moving from symbolic diversity work to structural anti-racist and decolonial change within their individual organizations and the overarching sector.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge that the research that is concluded in this report would have not been possible without the support of numerous partners and individuals across the Belgian NGO sector. We are grateful to the NGO employees who generously dedicated their time to participate and be interviewed in this study. We owe particular appreciation to the BIPOC respondents who shared their experiences with honesty and courage, including accounts that were often painful to revisit. Their willingness to speak about (anti-)racism in the NGO sector has been central to the depth of this research. As is characteristic of qualitative work, this report can only convey a fraction of the rich narratives and reflections shared by participants. We hope that in the future we can amplify the voices of our research participants by sharing the complexity and diversity of experiences within the NGO sector. The choice of centering the study and the report on the experiences and voices of BIPOC staff had emerged during the discussion of the working group on decolonization led by the NGO federation and the umbrella organization 11.11.11, and we are grateful for these organizations and the participants of the working group for entrusting these ambitions in our hands. We hope that our work could significantly contribute to advance conversations on anti-racism and decolonization in the Belgian NGO sector.

By centering the voices of BIPOC staff, this report aims to shift the discussion from abstract commitments to concrete accountability. It demonstrates that racism within NGOs is an everyday reality and is not only the result of individual prejudice, but also of organizational culture and practice that normalize and hide racial inequality. Addressing this, therefore, requires more than awareness-raising, reactive policies or fragmented projects; the main conclusions of this study highlight the need for a long-term strategy that links values to power structures, resources, and everyday practice. We hope that our conclusions and recommendations could contribute to making the Belgian NGO sector an anti-racist and decolonial space and credible actor in the fight for global justice that overcomes historical and ongoing hierarchies. By aligning its internal practices with the values it promotes externally, the sector can strengthen both its impact and integrity, ensuring that anti-racist solidarity truly begins within.

Setting out the Case and Methodology

A. Terminology and Language Use

When writing this report, we have adopted a terminology based on our sociological understanding of the topics discussed, and in line with our aspiration to use an inclusive and respectful language. We have also gained inspiration from terminology and communication guidelines developed by the Belgian [NGO-federatie](#) and [11.11.11](#) and the Dutch umbrella organization [Partos](#). In the following sections, we clarify some key concepts used throughout this report. Because terms carry specific historical and analytical meanings, it is important to outline how and why we use them in the context of this research.

It should be noted that when citing external sources (whether academic literature or policy analysis) or referring to them, we have mostly retained their own terminology in order to provide a better grasp of their perspectives. Particularly when citing research participants, we have preserved the original wording and language use, and have tried to retain that also in translated quotes, as the meanings and ideas attached to certain ways of expressions or particular concepts have been part of the empirical materials analyzed in this study, and was often reflected upon together with the research participants.

Colonization, coloniality and decolonization

Colonization is the direct administrative, political and economic control of a political entity on another territory and population, subjugating it to its own needs and interest. While colonial rule appears to have formally ended, the impacts of colonial power dynamics endure, forming what scholars termed *coloniality* (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000). The political, economic and epistemological dimensions of coloniality have been shaping various social institutions, including in the Belgian context (Bourabain, 2020a; 2020b; 2022; Bourabain et al., 2025). Coloniality is still an enduring characteristic of human societies that structure power hierarchies, also in concrete organizational settings such as NGOs. These power structures are what we aim to unravel in this study, and by doing so we also point out potential ways in which they can be dismantled, which is what we mean by *decolonization*.

(Structural) racism and anti-racism

Sociologists and racism scholars have distinguished between discrimination on the base of race and/or ethnicity that occurs on a personal and interpersonal level, to the accumulative effect of racial discrimination that becomes embedded in social institutions and eventually in social structures (for a critical review, see Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Our research mostly focuses on *structural racism*, i.e. the pervasive and systemic nature of racial discrimination. Highlighting individual prejudice is essential, but insufficient for understanding how racism is deeply woven into the fabric of societal institutions, policies, and practices. It operates through established power structures that perpetuate inequalities, effectively creating, confirming, and maintaining disadvantage for racialized groups. In this way, in societies such as Belgium that are predominantly on the privileged end of the enduring global structure of coloniality, racialized groups are often hierarchized based on their historical or contemporary positioning in this global structure, which impacts diverse aspects of their experiences within the broader society and its institutions (cf. Grosfoguel & Georas 2000). When discussing *anti-racism* in this report, we refer to the attempts to actively tackle racism in its various levels and diverse manifestations: not only individual or inter-personal, but also on the structural level.

Whiteness

Whiteness is commonly considered as related to skin color or pigmentation. However, scholars of race and ethnicity conceptualize whiteness as “a relational category, one that [...] signals the production and reproduction of dominance” (Frankenberg 1993: 273). Whiteness is thus a

relation to power, which not only structures access to resources and authority, but also functions as a norm-setting position that renders itself invisible. In this sense, whiteness may define, for example, what counts as legitimate knowledge and professional behaviour. As Garner (2007) notes, whiteness is defined by its “absence”, its ability to appear neutral, objective and universal.

BIPOC - Black, Indigenous and People of Color

The acronym BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. It emerged from North American activism and scholarship as a collective term to refer to individuals who are racialized and who experience structural systemic racism in diverse, often disproportional, ways, often related to the enduring effects of colonial dispossession.

In this research, BIPOC is used as an analytical category to discuss the experiences of employees who self-identify as non-white racialized minorities within Belgian NGOs. We acknowledge that the term originates from a specific North American context and that its use in Europe requires nuance. Therefore, when we refer to BIPOC employees, we include people of African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and Indigenous descent, as well as individuals who face discrimination based on visible or perceived ethnic and racial difference. We use BIPOC not as a homogenizing label but as a political, methodological and analytical tool to highlight shared experiences of racialization, while remaining attentive to the diversity within these groups and to the intersectional differences that shape their lives.

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality was first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe how Black women’s experiences of discrimination were not adequately captured by frameworks that treated race and gender as separate categories. Intersectionality has since become a central analytical lens in the social sciences, emphasizing that systems of power (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, coloniality) intersect and reinforce one another. In this report, intersectionality is used to understand how different axes of inequality shape the experiences of employees within NGOs. Intersectionality thus helps reveal that discrimination is not additive but relational. It operates through overlapping structures of privilege and oppression that shape how individuals experience inclusion or exclusion at work.

DEI - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

DEI is widely used in contemporary organizations (corporate, academic, non-profit) as a framework for policies, programs, and initiatives aimed at creating more just and inclusive environments. DEI comprises three interlinked dimensions:

Diversity refers to the presence of difference: a range of demographic, experiential, and identity variations (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, disability etc.).

Equity refers to justice and fairness in processes and outcomes. It recognizes that different individuals and groups may require different resources or accommodations to achieve comparable outcomes. It differs from the common idea of equality, which entails providing equal resources or opportunities to all individuals.

Inclusion refers to creating organizational cultures and environments to which diversity is integral: where all staff feel valued, can participate fully, and have their voices heard.

We analyze how NGOs adopt DEI discourse and how that shapes expectations and boundaries. We treat DEI not as a neutral container but as a politically loaded and contested discursive framework.

Research Participants

Power relations shape not only global dynamics or organizational settings, but also knowledge production and the relationship between researchers and research participants. When research participants belong to groups that are subjected to structural inequalities also outside the research context, the unequal status that characterizes the research context may become even more pressing. We have adopted several strategies to try and remedy this risk, including safeguarding anonymity and foregrounding the experiences, interpretations, needs and expectations of BIPOC employees in the NGO sector. To reflect this attempt in more collaborative relationships, we opted to use as much as possible the term *research participants*, sometimes simply shortened to *participants*, rather than terms such as respondents or interviewees.

The target group of the study consisted of organizations that are members of the Flemish NGO federation (*NGO-federatie*), the umbrella organization *11.11.11* and/or the Federation of Institutional Actors in Belgium (*Fiabel*). For readability, we use the term *NGO(s)* throughout the report to refer to all of these organizations.

B. Methodological Approach and Methods Implemented

As preparation for the research project, we acquainted ourselves with the Belgian NGO sector through reviewing introductory documents, browsing through the websites of the federations and umbrella organizations and their members, and through several preparatory conversations. The study itself began with a comprehensive review of academic literature on racism in organizations and specifically in the NGO sector. Our main focus was on empirical studies from diverse contexts, highlighting the challenges they raise and possible lessons that could be learned from them. We mostly set aside theoretical and conceptual debates, unless they had particular relevance to this report's subject matter. While some of the lessons learned from the literature are valuable in themselves and were taken into account when concluding our study, the main aim of the review was to develop our methodological approach, sample and our research tools (such as interview guides).

In parallel to the literature review, a policy analysis was conducted by a specialized staff member of LEVL vzw to identify how anti-racism, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization are currently embedded within the Belgian NGO sector's institutional and regulatory frameworks. The analysis also identified best practices in combatting (structural) racism and colonial legacies throughout the entire sector. At the sector level, NGO federation and 11.11.11 were consistently consulted regarding sector-related measures. At the meso level, the focus was on a fixed group of NGOs, namely our sample, as well as a randomly selected, stratified sample of NGOs chosen for each measure and examined for existing policy sources and measures published on their websites. In total, at least 20 organizations were analyzed for each policy domain (vision, values and code of conduct framework; diversity and inclusion plans; financial support; recruitment process; reporting mechanism; monitoring and evaluation; tools, training and working groups). To do this, we conducted a systematic review and analysis of policy documents produced by and for NGOs, donors and/or governmental agencies, including statutes of NGOs, integrity charters, funding regulations, and both publicly and non-publicly available (annual) reports. Policy-oriented literature was explored to understand the work of relevant actors, and special attention was given to literature that focuses on the NGO sector in neighboring countries to Belgium and countries that operate in comparable conditions, as well as on international organizations and agencies. It should be noted that the range of relevant international policy documents and practical examples appears rather limited. In addition, exploratory interviews were held with key stakeholders to offer an in-depth understanding of the current situation within the Belgian NGO sector and to guide us to relevant public and non-public policy documents to include in our analysis.

We then began with a systematic collection of qualitative data obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with employees in the Belgian NGO sector. The interviews were guided by an interview guide that was assembled based on these exploratory research phases, and the literature review in particular. The empirical research was divided into a preliminary phase in which 7 in-depth interviews with employees in two NGOs were conducted. After the preliminary research phase, we have reflected on the interview experiences, assessed and adjusted our sampling and recruitment strategies, and assessed and fine-tuned the interview guides. We then moved to the main research phase in which 27 employees in the sector have been interviewed. In total, the research included interviews with 34 respondents. The interviews were held with one respondent at a time, and lasted between 40 to 85 minutes, mostly around 50 to 60 minutes per interview. 31 interviews were conducted online, and 3 in person. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The transcribed interviews have been coded, and the codes were compared with fieldnotes that have been taken throughout the empirical research. We analyzed the data using thematic analysis, meaning that we have identified main themes that repeated throughout the interviews through interpretative engagement with the data (Wolgemuth et al. 2024). While most themes were related to our initial research questions, some new and surprising themes emerged throughout the interviews. We have therefore adopted an abductive research approach (Tavory and Timmermans, 2012) that allows us to take these new insights into account in order to fine-tune our analysis and writing process.

C. Selecting Participating NGOs

Our study focused on a broad sample of 11 organizations that are members of one (or more) of the following: the umbrella organization 11.11.11, NGO-federation or Fiabel. For readability, we use the term 'NGO' throughout the report to refer to all of these organizations. In sampling these 11 organizations, we have taken into consideration five main criteria in order to guarantee our sample's representative character:

1. We aimed to choose organizations operating in a range of different fields and in diverse **thematic areas**, such as agriculture, humanitarian relief, education and human rights.
2. We have taken the organization's **historical background** into account, by selecting organizations from different generations of NGOs formulated in the typology of Stangherlin (2001): humanitarian NGOs (1950-1960), development cooperation NGOs (1960-1970), third world NGOs (1970-1985), and technical/professional NGOs (1985-...).
3. From the NGOs sampled, some are Belgian branches of an international organization while others are Belgian organizations.
4. We selected organizations that had operations in –or related to– at least one of the **focus regions** selected for this research: the Great Lakes region in Africa, or Asia and the Middle East. In the Great Lakes region, we included the countries that were under direct Belgian colonization –Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi and Rwanda– and excluded Uganda, in order to examine whether and how Belgian colonialism and its enduring effects still impact the lived realities of BIPOC employees in Belgian NGOs. In Asia and the Middle East, most countries have been under colonial rule that still continue to impact their geopolitical positioning and the living realities of their populations, but unlike the Great Lakes region there was no direct colonial presence of Belgium in these areas, which forms an interesting comparative factor.
5. A somewhat less tangible criterion, was related to the existing engagement in the organization with issues related to structural racism, decolonization and anti-racism efforts. Based on our initial exploration of the sector, we tried to select organizations that had various **levels of engagement** with these issues.

D. Sampling Research Participants

For each organization, we have selected four profiles of employees to interview in order to better grasp the different perspectives and experiences unfolding within each organizational structure, enabling us to gain a better overview of the overall organizational landscape and everyday realities. The four selected profiles were:

1. **BIPOC employees** based in the NGOs' Belgian offices, based on self-identification as belonging to this category (cf. sub-section 'terminology and language use' above).
2. **BIPOC employees** based in offices of the selected NGOs' located **abroad**, in one of

the selected focus regions.

3. **HR officers** who are intensively involved in human resources strategies, including recruitment, retention, and workplace policies.
4. **Leading officers** being responsible for the management of a team, especially where BIPOC employees are operating.

Some of the research participants could be seen as belonging to more than one category. For instance, some participants were BIPOC leading officers, whereas some others were leading officers operating in the field of HR. The number of research participants within each category and the overlap between the categories is presented in the table and chart below.

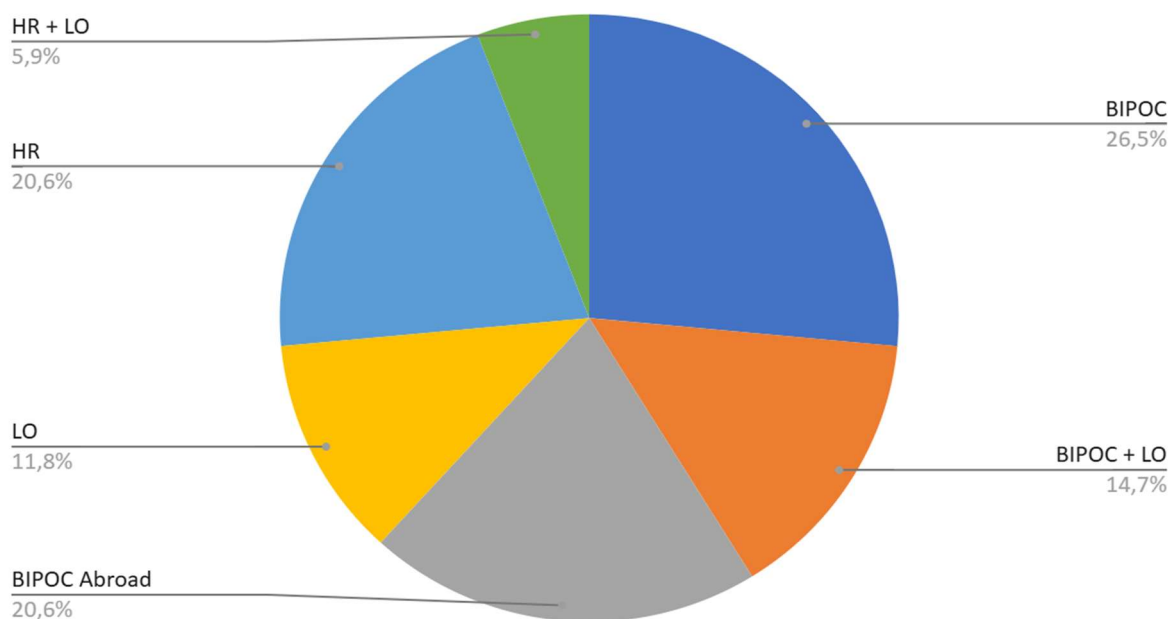
This report identifies significant parallels between the experiences of BIPOC employees in Belgium and those based abroad in country offices. Nevertheless, distinctions between the two groups are highlighted where applicable; specific categories are addressed separately when divergent realities or the need for tailored recommendations necessitated a differentiated approach.

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

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents by position

Respondent Categories



In four out of the 11 NGOs we selected, we were able to interview only two employees. In two others we interviewed three employees, and in five NGOs we were able to interview four employees, each from one of these categories. In total, we were able to interview 34 employees out of the 11 selected NGOs. A small number of research participants have been employed in one of the selected NGOs for a significant period, but at the time of the interview have already left the organization; all of these interviews delivered significant and up-to-date insights and we therefore included all of them in our analysis. In addition, it should be noted that a bit more than half (N=18; 52,9%) of the research participants were identified as women, while the rest (N=16) were identified as men; we did not have the possibility to engage in conversations with non-binary employees in the selected NGOs. Finally, the NGOs offices abroad from which research participants were recruited were all in the two selected focus regions. When possible, we also recruited research participants from the Belgian offices of the NGOs whose professional focus was on one of these two regions; for example a leading officer responsible for international partnerships with the focus region.

The main themes covered during the interviews included: (a) BIPOC employees' lived experiences of structural racism within the NGO sector; (b) organizational responses and lack thereof, including how these responses consider decolonization and/or intersectionality, as well as challenges in implementing anti-racist measures; and (c) exploring leadership and HR perspectives on addressing (structural) racism within the NGO sector. In this way, our research fulfills a gap in the existing research on diversity in Flemish non-profit organizations (NPOs), which has largely centered on leadership perspectives rather than on the lived experiences of BIPOC employees (Elloukmani et al., 2023). Our work aims at "centering voices of color as an essential step to building anti-racist, inclusive spaces" within NGOs (LaFortune et al., 2023).

E. Safeguarding Anonymity and Ethical Challenges

Safeguarding the safety and well-being of the research participants, and more concretely their anonymity and the confidentiality of our conversations with them, has been a main ethical commitment in this research, and for us as researchers. Indeed, many participants, especially BIPOC employees, only felt comfortable opening up about their organization's internal details and their experience once they had been guaranteed that their identity would not be disclosed and personal details facilitating their identification would be concealed:

"I have been pretty open and honest here, so I hope you will handle the information carefully without giving any hints about who I am."

As further highlighted in this report, some BIPOC employees indicated they had more to lose than their white colleagues, and shared concern for their future employment chances or career development should their identity be disclosed. These concerns serve as an additional evidence to the sensitivity often assigned to discussing racism and its manifestations within specific environments, including the NGO sector, which is discussed in more detail in the following parts of this report.

For these reasons, we did not indicate the names of the NGOs out of which research participants have been recruited, and we have disclosed only some of the criteria and considerations we have taken into account when selecting these NGOs. Furthermore, the quotes selected for this report have been anonymized, and rephrased when necessary, in order to respond to this data protection commitment. For example, when a participant described their exact job title, the wording was changed to a broader description. When interviewees referred to specific countries

or cities of assignment, these were generalized into larger geographical categories if such details could compromise the participant's anonymity. In addition, specific nationalities or racial backgrounds were omitted or generalized into the larger 'BIPOC' category. Apart from these modifications, we have made efforts to retain the original wording and style used by the research participants in all quotes included in this report. It should be noted that these quotes have been carefully selected to illustrate the key findings and conclusions of this report, but they are merely representative and not exhaustive.

Findings: Structural Racism in the Belgian NGO Sector

Part I: Experiences with Racism among BIPOC employees in the NGO sector

In this section, we pay particular attention to the lived experiences of BIPOC employees within the Belgian NGO sector. From the 34 interviews conducted as part of this study, 21 have been conducted with BIPOC employees. They share that everyday practices are often marked by micro-aggressions, subtle exclusions, and forms of racialization that remain largely unaddressed at the institutional level. These dynamics often unfold in intersectional ways (e.g. anti-Muslim racism that specifically targets women) demonstrating how multiple axes of inequality overlap. In addition, structural barriers in recruitment and advancement demonstrate the uneven access for BIPOC people in the NGO sector. Whiteness emerges as a common thread structuring organizational hierarchies and expectations, even when BIPOC staff reach leadership positions, where they often face heightened scrutiny. At the same time, the interviews highlight the coping mechanisms BIPOC employees develop in response to these structural inequalities. This shows that they should not be considered as passive agents within their organization, but instead they develop informal support and solidarity networks, activating strategies of resistance and resilience.

A. Micro-Aggressions and Everyday Racism

A.1. Employees experiences with everyday racism: Key findings from the interviews

Across nearly all interviews, BIPOC employees described recurring experiences of subtle exclusion, stereotyping, and bias in their everyday interactions at work. While overt racism was rarely mentioned, participants emphasized how micro-aggressions accumulate into a significant burden that shapes their sense of belonging, and produces feelings of exclusion, lack of recognition and the need for constant self-vigilance. We refer here to micro-aggressions as brief, commonplace and everyday verbal or non-verbal expressions of indignity, and pay particular attention to racial micro-aggressions which specifically target BIPOC (based, in part, on Sue et al. 2008).

A key pattern concerns **assumptive role-attribution**, where BIPOC employees are misidentified as occupying lower-status roles or assumed to lack authority until they can “*prove*” their competence. Others reported being assigned stereotypical attributes based on their race; for example, assumptions that Asian colleagues are naturally compliant and hardworking, or that African colleagues are less efficient and slower. Such generalizations, while sometimes disguised as compliments, reinforce racial hierarchies and limit recognition of individual expertise. Micro-aggressions also take the form of **cultural clichés**. Several BIPOC employees spoke about how their appearance, dress, or accent became a focus of commentary, often framed as curiosity. Yet these seemingly benign interactions reduced cultural identity to simplified or exoticized representations. Compliments on “*colorful African fabrics*” or jokes about accents, for instance, reinforced a subtle message of otherness; that diversity is celebrated only when it remains visible and non-threatening. This aligns with previous research showing that NGOs and NPOs expect BIPOC staff to perform their roles in ways that align with dominant assumptions about their identity, thereby reducing

“When you go to funders or other older white men to look for money, they’re gonna see you and say oh, you are the boss. Oh. Like you can just see they don’t take you seriously until you start talking and show that you know things.”

complex individuals to simplified or symbolic categories (Elloukmani et al., 2023; Weisinger et al., 2016). This can result in BIPOC employees becoming a 'token' or 'minority representative' denying their diverse skills, perspectives and trajectories that are much more relevant and meaningful to the employee.

"I would like to leave soon. And to be completely honest part of the reasons why I want to quit is because of the remnants of colonialism that still remain in the organization which I have described"

It is important to acknowledge that these micro-aggressions often combine **racial, gendered, and generational biases**. Women of color, especially Muslim women and Black women, reported that their gender and religion compounded the assumptions made about their competence, authority, or personal freedom. BIPOC men also encountered specific stereotypes. For example, they were portrayed as having *"issues with female authority"* based on cultural or religious background. These narratives reveal how racism intersects with gender biases to shape differentiated experiences within the same organizations. Over time, these everyday indignities lead to self-censorship and withdrawal. Some BIPOC employees described avoiding speaking up in meetings or withholding ideas after being corrected or dismissed in ways that undermined their confidence. To avoid such self-isolation by BIPOC staff, the literature emphasizes **intersectionality and the consideration of multiple identity axes** as key guiding principles for NGOs to understand how BIPOC staff are *"more than what they appear to be"* (Weisinger et al., 2016: 22). These frameworks encourage moving beyond cultural stereotypes and visible differences to address how authority, competence, and legitimacy are structured in everyday practices.

Importantly, many BIPOC employees stressed that the harm of micro-aggressions lies not in individual incidents but in their **repetition and normalization**. Because these behaviors are often unintentional and easily dismissed, they remain unaddressed, leaving BIPOC employees to silently absorb the impact. In several cases this cumulative strain led to attrition, with employees leaving organizations altogether; a finding consistent with existing research linking micro-aggressions to stress, anxiety and burnout (Nadal et al., 2014; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

"Well, I know that the [nationality] colleague had an issue with his supervisor actually. And then some colleagues said, maybe he has issues with female authority because he's a Muslim, which is a stupid remark to make in the first place. But soon it turned out that more people had issues with her management style, but he was the one who spoke up about it. But I felt like 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. "

In short, micro-aggressions are not minor misunderstandings but **symptoms of structural inequality** that shape who feels legitimate, confident, and heard within NGOs. Their persistence signals the limits of surface-level inclusion and highlights the need for proactive, sustained organizational strategies to build genuinely anti-racist work environments.

A.2. Basis for further improvement: Insights from policy analysis

In the Belgian NGO sector, there is a demonstrated need for **baseline measurements** (*nulmetingen* in Dutch) and **ongoing monitoring** of diversity, racism, and inclusion to gauge progress and ensure actions are needs-based. One NGO indicated in their annual report that preventive employee surveys are conducted, which allows them to offer more targeted training to staff on issues such as bullying and violence. **Well-being at work** is an essential component for retaining diverse personnel in the workplace and combating **micro-aggressions and racism**. Periodic and anonymous **employee surveys, well-being assessments and/or integrity questionnaires** are a crucial instrument for measuring these parameters.

Many organizations incorporate themes of decolonization, anti-racism and inclusion into their

annual performance reviews, and integrate them into the **personal and professional development** of employees. Integrity also receives explicit attention during the **onboarding of new staff**, with management discussing the ethical code with every newcomer. One organization developed an **anti-discrimination learning program**, details of which are also publicly available. To maintain the continuous visibility of these values, organizations like NGO-federation choose to permanently display the ethical code and information on integrity roles physically in the office, serving as a daily reminder of shared responsibility.

Recommendations (Set I): How to Address Micro-Aggressions and Everyday Racism?

Micro-aggressions are a pervasive issue reported by BIPOC staff across NGOs. Although often subtle or unintended, these practices accumulate over time creating environments that undermine belonging, professional confidence, and eventually result in retention. Addressing them requires more than personal goodwill: it demands structural, cultural, and educational change. Below are key recommendations grounded in the research findings, practice-based work and international scholarship.

1. Introduce Mandatory Training on Micro-Aggressions, Everyday Racism, White Privilege and Positionality

Belgian NGOs should reform the decolonization and anti-racism training programs provided to their staff. The policy analysis demonstrates that the current training provision is generally limited to a few workshops per year and lacking structural follow-up. Several research participants, both BIPOC and non-BIPOC, also expressed disappointment from the quality of the available training.

Therefore, we recommend that the federations, umbrella organizations and individual NGOs invest in **structural, multi-level training programs** systematically offered across the sector, independent of their own initiative or demand. Such programs should be part of a continuous learning and development process. Furthermore, these programs should cater to different levels, from basic training for all employees to specialized trajectories for management, HR professionals, and communication staff (Devine & Ash, 2021). Furthermore, providing **train-the-trainer programs** is important for organizations to build internal expertise and reduce dependency on external providers (additional information on such programs is available in the toolkit).

However, international research on anti-racism education shows that **training needs to differ significantly for BIPOC and non-BIPOC employees**, and that not accounting for these differences may risk reproducing harm rather than addressing it (Matias 2016; Sue 2010). It underscores the value of **racial affinity groups**: separate learning environments that allow participants to engage from their own positionality (Spanierman & Cabrera 2015). Research shows that BIPOC employees need protected spaces where they can share experiences freely without fearing minimization or reprisal, and without feeling expected to explain their experiences, manage reactions of White participants or perform emotional labor (Sue 2010; Nadal 2014). White participants, by contrast, can often benefit from spaces to examine whiteness, privilege and defensiveness, and to work through defensiveness, guilt, or denial, without shifting the emotional burden onto their BIPOC colleagues (DiAngelo 2018; Spanierman & Cabrera 2015). Finally, when senior white managers reflect on privilege or institutional complicity, separate spaces can facilitate deeper accountability and challenge hierarchical discomfort (Ford 2019).

Based on this evidence, separate training spaces can be particularly appropriate in the following contexts:

1. Processing racial trauma and micro-aggressions for BIPOC employees
2. Anti-racism learning for white employees
3. (White) Leadership reflection

However, research also emphasizes that separate spaces alone are insufficient. Anti-racism and decolonization require a shared organizational commitment. Without joint sessions, organizations risk reinforcing racial silos rather than cultivating collective responsibility (Bell & Adams 2016). Integrated, mixed-group sessions are therefore essential in the following moments:

1. **Developing shared language and frameworks:** Joint training helps establish common understandings of racism, micro-aggressions, and decolonization which are critical for consistent organizational practice.
2. **Collective problem-solving and policy development:** When revising recruitment practices, reporting mechanisms, or communication norms, cross-positional dialogue ensures that reforms are co-owned and not framed as 'BIPOC concerns.'
3. **Building solidarity cultures:** Research highlights that sustainable anti-racism requires co-learning and relational accountability across racial groups (León & LaPaperson 2019).

Taken together, evidence suggests that NGOs should adopt a **dual-track training model**:

- **Separate BIPOC and white affinity spaces** for initial reflection, processing, and positionality work.
- **Joint structured sessions** where learning converges, organizational commitments are articulated, and responsibilities are clarified.

Such a model recognizes differentiated needs without reproducing separation as an end in itself. Most importantly, it aligns with the core aim of anti-racism in organizations: not simply to raise awareness, but to transform everyday practices, shift power relations, and cultivate inclusive professional cultures. Concrete suggestions regarding the planning and implementation of training programs on the sectoral and organizational level can be found in the toolkit.

2. Create “Active Bystander” Protocols and Skills

Across interviews, BIPOC employees repeatedly described the emotional labor that navigating micro-aggressions alone requires. Even when racist behavior occurred in group settings, colleagues often remained silent, unsure of how to intervene or afraid of making the situation worse. This silence unintentionally reinforces the burden on BIPOC staff, who must choose between ignoring harmful behavior, confronting it at personal risk, or absorbing the impact internally.

In anti-racist scholarship, this dynamic is well-documented: workplaces relying on the 'victim' to raise concerns reproduce inequality by making resistance costly for those most affected (Sue, 2010; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). NGOs have a particular responsibility here, given their stated commitments to justice and solidarity: if they provide staff with the right support mechanisms, the credibility of their organizational values will increase.

Active bystander training shifts responsibility from individuals experiencing harm to **the collective**, equipping employees with the confidence and practical tools to respond constructively when they witness exclusionary behavior whether subtle or overt.

2.1 Train all staff in active bystander techniques

Introduce structured training that teaches employees how to intervene when witnessing micro-aggressions or discriminatory behavior. Useful frameworks include the “4D” or “5D” models widely used in anti-racism education. Adapted for NGO settings, these include:

- **Direct:** Calmly and clearly challenge the comment or behavior ("That comment reinforces a stereotype; can we rephrase?").
- **Distract:** Defuse the situation or shift attention ("Let's pause and return to the main point.").
- **Delegate:** Seek support from a colleague, manager, or trained mediator when unsafe or unsure.
- **Document:** Take note so patterns can be addressed later through formal systems.
- **Delay:** Check in privately with the targeted colleague afterwards ("I saw what happened. How can I support you?").

Training should include **role plays**, **case studies** from the NGO sector, and **situations involving hierarchies**, since discriminatory behavior often comes from supervisors or senior staff. Indeed, supervisors and senior staff play a crucial role in antiracism efforts, and it is therefore essential that they reflect on their own privileges, assumptions, behaviors and biases.

2.2 Make bystander responsibility part of managerial performance expectations

Managers set the tone: when they intervene, others follow. When they remain silent, harmful behavior appears permissible.

We therefore recommend to:

- require managers to report annually on actions taken to support an anti-racist, inclusive culture (e.g., addressing micro-aggressions, facilitating conflict resolution, encouraging respectful anti-racist communication).
- provide coaching, targeted developmental support or corrective training for managers who may show tendencies towards avoidance, minimization or lack of understanding.

This ensures active bystander skills are not optional but embedded into leadership practice.

3. Embed Anti-Racist Commitments into the Onboarding Process

To sustain structural change, anti-racism must be integrated from the very beginning of an employee's journey within a NGO. Embedding these commitments into onboarding processes ensures that all new staff regardless of background, function, or seniority understand the organization's expectations, values, and responsibilities regarding anti-racism, equity and inclusion.

Introducing anti-racism during onboarding serves three important functions.

1. It provides new employees with a shared vocabulary and baseline understanding of concepts such as privilege, structural racism, and power dynamics.
2. It signals that anti-racism is not an optional or peripheral theme but a core organizational priority embedded within everyday practice.
3. It helps prevent patterns identified in both the empirical research and the literature, where staff unfamiliar with issues of race, privilege, or exclusion unintentionally perpetuate harm.

Onboarding modules that explicitly address these dynamics through **structured reflection exercises, case-based learning, and facilitated discussion** can help close this awareness gap and reduce the burden currently placed on BIPOC staff to educate or correct colleagues.

Making anti-racism a standard and mandatory component of onboarding also helps establish a common foundation upon which further professional development, team

practices, and leadership expectations can build. Over time, this contributes to shifting organizational culture by ensuring that every employee, from their first day onwards, is equipped to contribute to a more equitable working environment.

To structurally combat racism and realize decolonization in the NGO sector, **targeted financial support can be helpful**. By specifically allocating budgets to anti-racist initiatives, this theme becomes a **priority with concrete resources and measurable results**, rather than an afterthought. Further information and recommendations related to addressing budget constraints are provided in Part IV of this report. **Multi-year funding** is advised over one-off projects, as organizational-level measures are often fragmentary and ad hoc. Long-term inclusion trajectories with measurable impact indicators, monitoring, and reporting will have a greater influence than isolated support moments. These projects can align with themes such as: workplace anti-racism, allyship, combating everyday racism, decolonization, inclusive recruitment, inclusive HR policy and positive action measures. Implementing these steps will lead to sustainable change in both organizational culture and the effectiveness and legitimacy of NGO work.

B. Experiences with Recruitment and Advancement

"I always applied to [organization's name], but I was never accepted. The moment I was accepted was when I went through a [backdoor opportunity]... We did the interview... He just wanted to get it over with... Then someone advised me to send another email to prove my motivation, and I felt like I got in by wearing them down..I had the impression that they didn't really want me, but they took me because they hadn't found anyone for more than a year."

Beyond interpersonal slights and micro-aggressions, BIPOC staff consistently described unequal access to **recruitment, promotion, and leadership opportunities** in the NGO sector. Their experiences reveal a pattern of systemic exclusion that operates less through overt racism than through subtle but persistent forms of bias built into organizational structures and cultures.

B.1. Existing Recruitment Procedures

To date, no specific research has been conducted on discrimination during the selection and recruitment phase within the NGO sector. Nevertheless, six out of seven intersectoral studies on labor market discrimination indicate the presence of systematic discrimination based on ethnicity, suggesting a structural societal issue that manifests across various sectors (WSE, 2024).

The policy analysis indicates that the application procedures within the sector are not consistently accessible or sufficiently clear. Most organizations in the NGO sector utilize a digital application form as the primary instrument for candidacy. They primarily rely on applications submitted via a CV and cover letter.

There are examples of inclusion disclaimers for diverse groups in these application forms. Some organizations' vacancy postings include an explicit diversity statement connected to their formal diversity plan, which is sometimes communicated explicitly on their website. This approach illustrates how organizations can voluntarily signal their diversity ambitions to potential candidates from underrepresented groups through clear inclusion language and explicit communication.

Subsequently, positive actions targeting BIPOC individuals are less widely recognized. A notable example is the French-speaking umbrella organization CNCD, which implements positive measures for women of color in cases of equal qualifications (Van Acker & Willems, 2020:17). Other initiatives included alleviating requirements regarding particular diploma types and/or their validation procedures.

From the candidate's perspective, there is limited transparency regarding selection procedures. Organizations' websites provide minimal information on procedural steps, selection criteria, deadlines, or feedback moments. A procedure that is not communicated to candidates does not contribute to transparency and equal opportunities, regardless of whether organizations internally maintain written procedures.

B.2. Perceptions of Recruitment Processes by Employees

Recruitment processes were often perceived as opaque and exclusionary. Many participants recounted having to apply multiple times, rely on informal networks, or enter organizations through "back doors", such as side projects or temporary contracts, before being given a chance. BIPOC staff commonly felt that their candidacies were only considered when organizations faced difficulty filling a position, or when diversity could be showcased without challenging existing hierarchies. Such experiences point to an uneven playing field where formal procedures, through seemingly neutral, replicate systemic barriers to entry. Even once recruited, BIPOC employees described they had to **work harder** to prove their competence. Several BIPOC employees reported being subtly questioned about whether they were hired on merit or to fulfill diversity expectations. These perceptions of tokenism create an additional emotional burden, requiring racialized staff to constantly demonstrate professionalism and performance to gain legitimacy. For some, recognition only came after repeatedly 'proving' themselves to colleagues who initially doubted their authority.

"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."

Promotion and advancement opportunities were described as even more limited. Many respondents spoke of repeatedly applying for leadership roles without success or feedback. They perceived decision-making processes as lacking transparency and accountability, often guided by informal networks and subjective notions of 'fit.' A recurring concern was the belief that leadership roles were informally reserved for white European staff. The rationale given for this often centered on donor relations: organizations, donors, and embassies tended to assume that white directors were more 'credible' or culturally aligned with funding bodies. This pattern reflects a racialized economy of trust in which whiteness continues to signify professionalism and reliability.

Representation at the top remains one of the most striking gaps. Participants noted that boards and senior management teams remain overwhelmingly white and male, reinforcing a cycle in which people in power recruit and promote those who resemble them. Several HR professionals and staff members recognized this self-perpetuating dynamic but struggled to change it without structural reform.

B.3. Point of Reflection: Why representation alone is not enough and enhanced decision-making power is crucial

Early diversity frameworks, particularly those emerging from Equal Employment Opportunity legislation in the United States, were primarily designed to ensure compliance with anti-discrimination laws (Weisinger et al., 2016). This legal foundation gave rise to affirmative action measures that focused on representation as a corrective tool. While such approaches provide clear and measurable outcomes, scholars warn that they often result in '**representational diversity**' or '**counting heads**': a focus on numbers rather than on transforming organizational power relations.

The literature consistently shows that the presence of BIPOC employees alone does not guarantee that their knowledge, perspectives, or expertise are valued or integrated into

organizational decision-making. Without structural change, BIPOC staff are more likely to be confined to lower-status roles, excluded from leadership trajectories, or denied access to meaningful responsibilities and professional development (Meaux et al., 2021; Weisinger et al., 2016: 15). Particularly in early diversification phases, this can lead to feelings of being “*alone, over-exposed and isolated*” (Meaux et al., 2021) among BIPOC employees.

Moreover, representational diversity carries the risk of tokenism. Several studies demonstrate how organizations may showcase BIPOC staff to signal inclusivity to donors or external audiences, while internal hierarchies and decision-making structures remain largely unchanged (Meaux et al., 2021). In such cases, diversity becomes performative rather than transformative, obscuring persistent inequalities in power and recognition. Scholars therefore call for a shift from ‘representational diversity’ to ‘**pluralistic diversity**’ where inclusion, being “*the degree to which individuals feel part of critical organizational processes*” (Weisinger, 2016: 11), goes beyond numbers and ensures that individuals feel part of the organization. This transformation requires ‘relational development’ (Weisinger, 2016), which is the ongoing cultivation of trust, collaboration and shared accountability within organizations. In this framework, diversity is not an endpoint but part of a deeper process of structural reform aimed at addressing power imbalances and embedding racial equity into organizational culture (Meaux et al., 2021).

For BIPOC women, these dynamics are compounded by **intersectional pressures**. Many described facing higher scrutiny and narrower margins for error than their peers. They reported being judged not only as individuals but as representatives of their entire racial or gender group, creating what one described as “the double pressure of having to perform and not confirm stereotypes.” Others noted the need to moderate their behavior, being careful not to “take up too much space”, to avoid being perceived as confrontational.

Taken together, these findings highlight a **racialized hierarchy of labor** within the NGO sector. Diversity is to some extent welcomed at the entry level but filtered out at the level of decision-making. Formal policies emphasizing meritocracy or neutrality, while well-intentioned, often mask deeper structural inequalities tied to race, gender, and cultural background. As a result, BIPOC employees continue to encounter invisible ceilings that limit their access to recognition, authority, and advancement even in organizations committed to equality and social justice.

Recommendations (Set II): How to Recruit a Diverse Workforce?

Before outlining concrete measures to diversify recruitment and retention, it is important to clarify **why** diversity in the NGO workforce matters in the first place. Findings from this research demonstrate that many Belgian NGOs remain predominantly white-European, both in their staff composition and leadership structures. Addressing this imbalance is not only a question of representation, but of credibility, effectiveness, and alignment with the sector’s core values.

From a ‘**social justice**’ perspective, scholars argue that it is a normative imperative and ethical responsibility to correct structural inequalities embedded in colonial and racial histories through hiring BIPOC staff (Meaux et al., 2021; Weisinger et al., 2016). NGOs can align with this reasoning by integrating diversity into their broader mission and learning processes, making the topic an “integral part of the structure” (Elloukmani et al., 2023: 538).

From a ‘**business case**’ perspective, research highlights clear organizational benefits of diversity. Studies consistently show that diverse teams are more creative, better at problem-solving, and more responsive to complex social realities than homogeneous ones (Meaux et al., 2021; Weisinger et al., 2016). In the NGO sector specifically, staff with different racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds can strengthen relationships

with the communities that organizations serve, improve trust, and enhance the legitimacy of programs and advocacy work. In several sectors, organizations that have invested in proactive diversity strategies have also been better equipped to respond to external scrutiny and evolving societal expectations around equity and inclusion (Elloukmani et al., 2023).

Against this background, the recommendations below focus on **how Belgian NGOs can recruit, retain, and support a diverse workforce in a sustainable way**, while avoiding tokenism and ensuring that diversity leads to genuine inclusion and shared power.

1. Reform Recruitment Practices

Recruitment processes often reproduce systemic inequalities by overemphasizing credentials, networks, or specific linguistic or cultural norms that disadvantage BIPOC candidates. NGOs should critically review job requirements to ensure that only competencies essential to the position are included. This may involve lifting unnecessary recruitment criteria which tend to exclude candidates from BIPOC communities (Elloukmani et al., 2023; LaFortune, 2023). Instead, selection should focus on transferable skills and motivation that enrich the organization's mission. This practice has already been implemented among some of the organizations included in this report. In addition to skills and motivation, scholars recommend **prioritizing lived experiences and racial equity** in candidate evaluations (LaFortune et al., 2023).

To further reduce bias, NGOs are encouraged to adopt anonymized CV screening. By removing names, photos, or other identifying information in the first stages of recruitment, organizations can minimize the influence of unconscious bias and increase the chances of BIPOC candidates being shortlisted (Vivec, 2022). Anonymous job applications can be implemented by using a standard application form on the website that includes only questions relevant to the position. In this way, only information that is useful for assessing the candidate is collected. This helps prevent the disclosure of information that is not relevant to the assessment process but may create unconscious bias. In addition, large organizations can make use of an external recruiter or a specially trained internal staff who pre-screens the CVs and forwards them without names or other irrelevant personal data of the candidates to HR employees who selects the candidates. At the same time, it is crucial that evaluation criteria are race-sensitive and anti-racist. So-called 'objective criteria,' such as specific degrees, uninterrupted career paths, or certain linguistic norms, are not always neutral. They may reflect historically western, middle-class and white standards of professionalism and merit. NGOs are therefore encouraged to critically review what counts as 'competence' and 'fit' and to assess whether selection criteria inadvertently privilege dominant profiles.

Importantly, diversity-oriented recruitment and retention strategies are not experimental or unrealistic. Public institutions and organizations in Belgium and elsewhere already apply measures such as anonymized CV screening often with positive results in terms of workforce diversity.

In Flanders, scholars identify innovative recruitment tools that also look into the awareness of majority candidate hires, **such as asking job candidates to respond to fictional scenarios about race, racism and power relations during interviews**. This approach helps assess candidates' awareness of systemic racism and their ability to navigate intercultural dynamics, thus embedding anti-racism into hiring from the outset (Elloukmani et al., 2023).

2. Implement Positive Action

Several interviewees emphasized that without positive action, diversity in leadership will not progress. Quotas or targeted recruitment initiatives, for diverse positions and particularly for boards and senior management, can serve as temporary but powerful

tools to correct structural imbalances. In the framework of this research, hiring individuals with an ethnic minority background specifically is seen as an attempt to correct structural and social inequalities (Weisinger et al., 2016) – embedded in a historical context of colonialism and racism (Meaux et al., 2021)

Establishing minimum diversity targets can help ensure that BIPOC professionals are not perpetually excluded from the recruitment process.

Several companies and institutions, including the Flemish Government and the City of Antwerp, utilize positive action measures which led to a significant increase in workforce diversity. For instance, the Flemish Government reported a 5.5% increase in the number of employees of foreign origin from 2016 to 2024 (Vlaanderen, 2024).

The following are examples of measures, developed by the Flemish forum of minoritized communities (i.e. Minderhedenforum) and adopted in other sectors, which may act as stimulants for diversity and inclusion efforts (Minderhedenforum, n.d.) :

- Support during recruitment procedures (e.g., coaching).
- Internships and summer jobs reserved for specific groups with a guarantee of employment (i.e., guaranteed job offers upon successful completion).
- Establishing a recruitment pool/reserve specifically for individuals with a migrant background.
- Mandating a minimum representation/reach in the various phases of the selection process (e.g., ensuring a minimum percentage of candidates from underrepresented groups advance to the interview stage).

In addition, positive action can also be applied after a first screening of anonymized CVs, if it turns out that a BIPOC candidate meets the core requirements of the position but scores slightly lower than another candidate on certain selection criteria. In such cases, the organization may make a motivated decision to give priority to this candidate, provided that additional training, coaching, or support is offered to address any identified development needs. This approach recognizes potential and enables sustainable talent development, while safeguarding the quality and effectiveness of the role.

However, positive action should not stand alone but form part of a broader, organization-wide anti-racist policy. Such a framework aims to build race-sensitive competencies, prevent discrimination, and promote an inclusive and supportive work environment.

3. Broaden Outreach and Representation

Attracting BIPOC staff also depends on how NGOs present themselves to the public. Organizations should audit their communication strategies, imagery and marketing materials to ensure that diversity is visibly and authentically represented. NGOs could make use of the practical tools of NGO-federation and 11.11.11 to establish this, for example the [lexicon](#) or the inspiration guide on [Decolonization.Now!](#). As such, representation matters as it can increase the amount of BIPOC staff applying when they see themselves reflected in the organization's staff and values. It is, however, crucial to not make diversity in communication performative. Using diverse imagery solely for reputation management, without corresponding internal change, can reproduce the very inequalities such campaigns claim to challenge. Otherwise diversity branding risks tokenizing BIPOC staff. Representation, thus, should accurately reflect the organization's workforce and be grounded in genuine anti-racist and inclusive practices. In addition, NGOs could collaborate with BIPOC community organizations and networks to advertise vacancies. Examples include the "Hijabis at Work" initiative in Belgium, or possible collaboration with international networks such as Wasici and Acapaca.

Recommendations (Set III): How to Retain BIPOC Staff?

Recruiting BIPOC staff is only one part of building a diverse and inclusive NGO sector. Equally crucial is ensuring their **retention and professional growth**. While organizations may successfully attract BIPOC candidates, they may fail to create environments where they feel valued, supported, and able to advance. High turnover among BIPOC staff often reflect deeper structural and cultural challenges within the organization. Retention must therefore be understood as an ongoing organizational responsibility, requiring a shift in workplace culture, leadership practices and accountability mechanisms.

Fostering a positive team climate, combined with **psychological safety** (trust, boldness, and making a difference) and inclusive leadership (leadership development), is a key component of employee retention (McCausland, 2023; Geue, 2018; Russen et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2013). To retain BIPOC employees in the workplace, it is essential to actively and sustainably invest on these topics.

A **positive team climate** means that team members feel respected and welcome, regardless of their background, identity, or position. For BIPOC employees, this is especially important, as they more often face exclusion, stereotyping, or subtle forms of inequality. In a positive team climate, attention is paid to cultural differences, assumptions are questioned, and there is space to share experiences. This contributes to trust, mutual cooperation, and a sense of shared ownership within the team.

- Teams make explicit agreements about **collaboration, communication, and feedback**, creating room to discuss cultural differences and expectations. It is also important to note that not everything is a cultural difference.
- Leaders and team members actively **acknowledge colleagues' contributions**, including those that are less visible or that differ from the dominant work style. There is not just one way of doing things, and mixed teams with a positive team climate often achieve better results precisely because of their different approaches.
- Teams create fixed moments to share experiences, such as **check-ins or reflection sessions**, so that signals of exclusion or tension become visible at an early stage. This also includes feedback moments, learning from one another, and celebrating successes (both large and small).

Psychological safety means that employees feel safe to be themselves and to speak up, even when their perspective differs from the dominant norm. For BIPOC employees, this is essential, as their experiences and insights are otherwise more likely to be marginalized or ignored. Psychological safety makes it possible to address discrimination, microaggressions, and blind spots. This is a prerequisite for learning, inclusion, and structural change within the organization.

- Leaders and senior staff **lead by example** by naming their own mistakes and uncertainties, thereby normalizing learning.
- Organizations establish **safe channels** where employees can discuss discrimination, microaggressions, or discomfort without fear of repercussions (more detail in set VI).
- In meetings, deliberate space is created for different voices, for example through **structured speaking rounds** or by consciously **allowing silences**. This also includes horizontal decision-making moments instead of purely vertical decisions.

Anti-racist leadership means that leaders actively work toward equal opportunities and consciously pay attention to the experiences of employees from different backgrounds, including BIPOC. This requires leaders to reflect on their own frame of reference, power, and privileges, and to actively create space for voices that are less often heard. Anti-racist leaders recognize that exclusion is often structural and intersectional. Through this form of leadership, an organizational culture emerges in which diversity is not only present, but also genuinely valued and leveraged.

- Leaders receive **training and coaching** in recognizing bias, power dynamics, and structural inequality, with specific attention to BIPOC and intersectionality, including how to deal with discomfort, both their own and that experienced by employees.
- **Decision-making processes** are critically examined: who is at the table, who is not, and whose perspective carries the most weight?
- Leaders explicitly make anti-racism part of their role, for example by linking it to concrete goals and regularly being held accountable for it.

Introduce Transparent Employment Structures

BIPOC employees often witness how compensation schemes, work-related benefits and promotion opportunities are unequally distributed between different staff members, with white employees more than BIPOC employees considered for such benefits and opportunities. Throughout this research, BIPOC participants from foreign offices have sometimes perceived unequal treatment between white European staff and employees based in the Great Lakes and Middle Eastern regions, whether related to recruitment, remuneration or advancement opportunities. These disparities reinforce long-standing colonial hierarchies within international cooperation, considering (proximity to) whiteness to be associated with expertise, authority and therefore, better working conditions and pay (Bian, 2022; Goodfellow, 2024).

To address this scholars advise organizations to publish transparent salary bands to counter income imbalances and inequalities (LaFortune et al., 2023). Belgian NGOs should commit to full transparency in salary and qualification structures. Documents on qualification requirements and salary grids can clearly show how positions across different offices correspond in terms of responsibility, required qualifications, and pay scale. Publishing these on internal platforms allows all staff to refer to standardized, objective criteria when assessing their own position or advancement prospects.

To maintain accountability, NGOs should conduct regular pay equity reviews to identify potential disparities based on race or region. The main findings of these reviews should be shared internally, along with concrete measures to address any imbalances. Human resources and management should be explicitly responsible for following up on the results.

It is recommended to involve staff representatives from both Belgian offices and partner-country offices in the design and review of these frameworks. Additionally, information sessions can be provided to explain how equivalence, qualification, and salary structures are determined. It is important to note that pay equity does not strictly mean that everybody in every country earns the exact same amount of money. Wages need to be adjusted to the local cost of living, to avoid disrupting local labor markets. Fair pay is of course key.

C. Diversity in Management and Leadership Positions

Across all interviews, one theme emerged with striking consistency: **senior management and board structures in Belgian NGOs remain overwhelmingly white and European**, even in organizations that present themselves as global, inclusive, or diversity-minded. While NGOs often highlight diversity in their country offices or junior staff, representation at the levels where

"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."

decisions are made; that is boards, management committees, or director roles, has barely shifted. This mirrors broader research showing that diversity in organizations is frequently celebrated symbolically at the margins while remaining absent from the centers of power (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2018). Participants described leadership teams that are almost entirely composed of white European staff, with minimal racial diversity. Although some organizations made attempts to

diversify their teams following the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, these shifts were often superficial and short-lived. BIPOC staff who were recruited during these periods frequently did not remain long, underscoring the sector's **retention problem**. Without addressing deeper organizational culture, decision-making structures, and norms of whiteness, diversity gains at the top remain temporary.

A second pattern concerned **racialized ideas of legitimacy**, especially in relation to donors. Many participants believed that leadership roles, particularly externally visible functions like country directors, were informally reserved for white Europeans, who were seen as more credible or aligned with donor expectations. This belief was echoed by staff across different organizations and helps explain why structural homogeneity persists even as NGOs publicly promote values of equality and partnership. The result is a racialized hierarchy in which whiteness continues to define competence, authority, and trustworthiness (Heron, 2007; Khotari, 2016; LaFortune et al., 2023; O'Neal, 2016). In line with previous research, whiteness, in this context, is not a matter of merely skin color but a norm-setting position that defines what counts as legitimate knowledge and professional behavior, while it renders itself invisible, neutral and universal (Heron, 2007; Khotari, 2006; Shachar, 2014).

The interviews also showed how **racial equality is often overshadowed by other agendas**, especially **gender equality**. HR and management staff frequently framed diversity in terms of gender or socio-economic issues, sometimes without mentioning race at all until prompted. Several organizations only introduced gender-balanced boards very recently, and racial diversity had still not entered strategic discussions. Staff described receiving well-developed gender trainings, while anti-racism or decolonization trainings were optional, sporadic, or entirely absent. As a result, racial inequalities remain structurally unaddressed. Again, the invisibility of whiteness allows white NGO staff to avoid self-reflection of their positionality and on the racialized-colonial histories that shape the

"Our projects are supposed to be about equal partnerships, but in our board you only see Flemish representatives fighting for their own institutional interests. No one is representing the interests of the partner institutions. So it just conflicts with our core business."

sector, which has also been highlighted previously within the NGO sector (NGO federatie, n.d.; Van Acker & Willems, 2020).

Importantly, participants highlighted the consequences of this lack of diversity for NGOs' **credibility and mission alignment**. For organizations operating globally; and often in regions where their target groups are racialized communities; the absence of BIPOC leadership undermines the principles of equitable partnerships and representation. Some respondents stressed that leadership diversity can strengthen trust, improve communication with partners, and model social justice in practice. Yet, these benefits remain largely unrealized because leadership pipelines continue to reproduce whiteness. Several BIPOC managers, however, demonstrated how BIPOC leadership **can transform organizational culture**. More particularly, BIPOC employees in leadership positions have proved to play a crucial role in diversity and inclusion efforts. On the one hand, most BIPOC managers we interviewed were attempting to engage in decolonization efforts once they reached a leadership position, and used their decision making power to tackle racism. On the other hand, BIPOC leaders explained that employees often felt more comfortable approaching them about racial incidents, or that they were more attuned to subtle forms of discrimination that their white colleagues overlooked. These examples illustrate the unique contributions BIPOC leadership can make not only symbolically, but materially in advancing anti-racist practice.

At the same time, many BIPOC leaders described a workplace structured around a **"single way of seeing."** They frequently felt pressure to justify their perspectives, modify their behavior, or explain cultural differences to colleagues who defaulted to Eurocentric norms. These dynamics reinforced feelings of isolation and emphasized the need for organizations to move beyond representation alone and address deeper systemic norms embedded in decision-making.

"Our employees in the continents were happy to have me in a leadership position. Since we had a similar culture, it was possible for me to be a mediator between the office in Belgium and the staff back in Africa and Asia. I understood cultural differences better, and sometimes I could bring a message across in a better way or defend the interests of our staff in the continents"

Taken together, these findings suggest that leadership diversity remains one of the most significant and most neglected frontiers in the Belgian NGO sector. Without intentional structural reform of boards, recruitment pipelines, and leadership cultures, NGOs risk maintaining a form of representational diversity at the bottom while reproducing racialized privilege at the top. True transformation requires not only hiring BIPOC staff, but ensuring they can advance, remain, and shape the organizations whose missions they help carry forward.

Recommendations (Set IV): How to Diversify Leadership?

The **benefits of appointing BIPOC directors** and leaders have been widely recognized and demonstrated (Elloukmani et al., 2023; Meaux et al., 2021; Sage-Dankemeyer, 2017). In the broader nonprofit sector, the presence of BIPOC directors ensures that the mission and activities set for the organization reflect diverse communities' needs and interests (Elloukmani et al., 2023). A range of studies shows that leadership diversity enhances creativity, deepens ethical engagement, and fosters a broader understanding of global justice issues (Meaux et al., 2021; Sage-Dankemeyer, 2017). Therefore,

attempting to tackle human right violations and systemic inequalities while excluding those most impacted are inherently self-defeating (Sage-Dankemeyer, 2017).

Lead officers who are BIPOC are critical **to facilitate and implement diversity and inclusion practices** within NGOs (Elloukmani et al., 2023; Mason, 2020; Meaux, 2020). According to Mason (2020: 23), leadership engagement is a decisive factor in the success of such practices as “their support or opposition to these policies can either facilitate or prevent the adoption of organizational change.” Similarly, Elloukmani et al. (2023) demonstrate that BIPOC leaders within NPOs can influence their organization’s approach to diversity by drawing on their own experiences. Multiple studies confirm that leaders from underrepresented groups tend to invest more effort in addressing organizational inequalities, and use their positions to advocate for greater diversity (Elloukmani, et al. 2023; Meaux, 2020). For instance, in their case study on a women’s rights NGO, LaFortune and colleagues (2023) identify two key leadership practices that effectively foster a diverse and inclusive space for Black employees. The first, is the presence of a **supportive and engaged leadership team**, and second, **proactive mentorship** from underrepresented groups.

Leadership also plays a pivotal role in **setting the tone for anti-racism and inclusion**. One American case study identifies proactive **mentorship cultures** as particularly successful. In such settings, leaders regularly check in with BIPOC staff, ask about their needs, and provide opportunities for professional development (LaFortune et al., 2023). This form of intentional, relational leadership not only improves workplace well-being but also challenges the isolation and emotional labor that BIPOC employees often face.

Against this backdrop, we provide the following recommendations to diversify leadership within NGOs.

Targeted Internal Leadership Development

Develop a structured internal leadership pathway for BIPOC employees with a specific focus on management competencies (e.g. people management, strategic decision-making, organizational leadership). Participation should be based on transparent criteria and aligned with individual development plans.

This initiative must be accompanied by efforts to address negative or exclusionary workplace cultures. Without tackling underlying issues such as lack of psychological safety, tokenism, or limited recognition of diverse leadership styles, interest in leadership trajectories may remain low and the policy risks being ineffective.

Role Models and Ambassadors in Management

Actively identify and support BIPOC managers to act as role models and ambassadors. Their visibility should be strategically used in internal communication, recruitment campaigns, and leadership promotion initiatives.

The emphasis should not be on individual success stories alone, but on the added value of diverse leadership for organizational performance, improved decision-making and innovation, and the broader societal relevance and legitimacy of inclusive leadership.

Positive actions in management functions

Use positive action in management functions to more effectively reach the target group. This can be achieved through outreach recruitment, by working with channels and organizations that have strong connections with and knowledge of the target group. This

approach increases the pool of qualified candidates who are often underrepresented in traditional recruitment processes.

Positive action allows organizations to deliberately select a BIPOC candidate when two or more candidates are equally suitable, with the aim of building a diverse and representative management team. As indicated above as a general recommendation, also in the case of management positions the organization may make a motivated decision to give priority to a BIPOC candidate who meets the position's core requirements, but scores slightly lower than another candidate on certain selection criteria. The organization may propose the BIPOC candidate additional training, coaching, or support. It is essential to communicate clearly and transparently, both internally and externally, that this approach is grounded in the principle of equal opportunities. Such communication can emphasize that certain groups face structural barriers to accessing management positions in society, and that positive action aims to address and correct these inequalities. Clearly motivating this preference strengthens organizational support, transparency, and the legitimacy of this policy.

D. Coping and Resistance Mechanisms of BIPOC Employees

In the interviews, BIPOC staff described a wide range of strategies they use to deal with racism and exclusion in NGOs. These practices exist on a continuum from coping to resistance. **Coping** refers to ways of enduring or minimizing harm in order to survive within existing structures (e.g. silence, proving oneself). **Resistance**, by contrast, involves challenging these structures; either openly (e.g. through confrontation) or strategically (e.g. through coded language). Importantly, coping and resistance are not mutually exclusive: BIPOC employees often move between 'soft' and 'hard' forms of response depending on the context, risk, and their positionality.

A first set of strategies reflects the **difficulty of identifying, naming, or proving racism**. Because racist dynamics in NGOs often take subtle, ambiguous forms, many BIPOC staff reported internal doubt and second-guessing wondering whether they were misinterpreting situations or overreacting. In this context, silence becomes a protective mechanism. Employees frequently chose not to voice concerns because they lacked confidence that their experience would be recognized or believed. The fear of being labeled a **'troublemaker,'** damaging one's professional reputation, or jeopardizing job security further reinforced this tendency toward self-censorship. **Silence** as a coping tool was often used due to mistrust in complaint systems, even when explicit racist remarks are made. BIPOC staff expressed low confidence in internal reporting platforms, describing them as slow, unpredictable and risky. The lack of **trust in formal complaint systems**, however, also lead to BIPOC people feeling they need to speak up and resolve the situation themselves. In some cases they choose for **direct confrontation** when racist remarks were being made about their racial or religious identity.

"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."

"We live in a context of rising fascism, being decolonial is no longer mainstream. And you have to resist, but you have to be strategic about your resistance. I know that as a [ethnicity] woman, I can be fired if I am too unapologetic. We have a decolonization plan but we don't call that decolonization. Instead, we use an alternative term. Because people see 'decolonization' as a scary word and they panic. I am very vocal but just in a different way. You don't preach to the convinced, you go to the people who are not convinced. You don't change the essence of the message, you just change the terminologies. I want to decolonize the sector, I just go smart about it"

Several participants designed strategies to better convince their organization's staff and hierarchy to be more active on decolonization, for example by making the case for **decolonization more digestible**. They described reshaping vocabulary, reframing sensitive topics, or using indirect advocacy to make their interventions more 'acceptable' to skeptical colleagues. Such strategies

reveal the burden placed on BIPOC employees to translate, soften, or encode their resistance in ways that minimize institutional defensiveness.

Finally, some BIPOC employees relied on **allies**; trusted colleagues who could act as a spokesperson and would advocate for them. These alliances were particularly important for staff who felt unsafe addressing racism themselves but still wanted the issue to be acknowledged.

Together, these practices show the unequal burden placed on BIPOC employees who must calculate how to survive and when to resist. What these conversations particularly demonstrate is a widespread mistrust in official complaint systems. Rather than turning to formal HR procedures or integrity platforms, many employees rely on individual strategies to manage racist incidents (section C1). Recognizing and addressing this gap is therefore essential if NGOs want to move beyond symbolic commitments and create environments where BIPOC staff feel supported not only in coping but also in resisting discrimination.

What can we learn from this?

The stories shared by BIPOC employees highlight areas where NGOs can learn and improve. Subtle exclusions, limited career opportunities, and the extra pressure to prove oneself are experiences that can easily go unnoticed, but they affect how staff feel and how long they stay. Recognizing these dynamics creates an opportunity for NGOs to reflect on their internal practices, such as how recruitment, promotion, and everyday interactions are experienced by different groups, and to consider how they can make organizational cultures more supportive and transparent. By taking these insights into account, NGOs can better retain diverse talent and ensure that all staff feel valued and able to thrive.

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

In order to address the issues raised in the above section, organizations have to reflect on concepts such as racism and anti-racism and what they entail, but also on the related notions of decolonization and diversity. However, a central finding from the interviews is that these concepts are not sufficiently thought through, and often strategically reinterpreted or diluted within NGOs. Staff frequently reported confusion, contradictions, and even outright resistance when these terms were introduced in their organizations. For some, the terms were used interchangeably or as synonyms, while others noted that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) were framed more positively, in contrast to the perceived “radicalism” of decolonization or the discomfort associated with naming racism. These perceptions often map onto organizational hierarchies: senior management tends to favor concepts perceived as ‘less controversial’ like DEI, while BIPOC staff and junior employees push for more explicit recognition of racism and coloniality. In what follows, we discuss perceptions among NGO staff regarding these three interrelated themes: **1) interpretations and perceptions of anti-racism, 2) interpretations and perceptions of decolonization, and 3) interpretations and perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion.**

Research participants also provided examples of double standards and adherence to hegemonic geo-political interests in the responses of NGOs to global events, such as the war in Ukraine or the ongoing genocide in Palestine. Research participants described hesitation, avoidance, or censorship when addressing Israeli aggression against Palestinians, which was less the case in relation to Ukraine, for example. This differential response reinforced participants’ perceptions that diversity and decolonization discourses remain symbolic rather than transformative. We discuss this at the end of the section.

Existing tools On Diversity, Decolonization and Anti-Racism

Textual and visual resources

11.11.11 and NGO-federation invest in **practical tools and research** that organizations can utilize to enhance the **inclusiveness of their policies and communication** (NGO-Federatie, Webpage dekoloniseren). These resources address various facets of organizational work, ranging from inclusive language and visual representation to crisis communication, integrity policy, and decolonial thought. They offer **concrete frameworks** for employees to critically reflect on their internal policies and practices.

Furthermore, the website of Ngo-federatie, particularly the **Decolonization Working Group of NGO-federation and 11.11.11**, provides an extensive list of recommended reading, viewing, and listening materials with links to other organizations and platforms, thereby fostering a broader **learning network**. This approach is founded on a combination of knowledge development, awareness-raising (sensitization), and concrete action frameworks designed to support employees and organizations in establishing an inclusive work environment.

Concrete examples of recently developed tools and reports include the **guide to crisis communication concerning integrity violations**, the research report **"Implications of Decolonization for the Flemish Development Cooperation Sector"** (Van Acker et al., 2020), and the inspiration guide **"Decolonise. Now!"** which includes a lexicon on decolonization and the inspiration guide on gender equity that explicitly incorporates a decolonizing perspective. In addition, there are several specialized studies and inspiration guides on equitable partnerships and funding, such as: the Inspiration Guide on ["Ontkoking Noord-Zuid"](#), the research "Shift the Power into practice" (2022), the research "Decentralization"(2024), and lastly the research "Rebalancing Power: an analysis of Equitable Funding and their implications for Belgian NGOs"(2025).

Workshops and interactive tools

In 2023, for example, NGO-federation organized a **three-day trajectory** where **19 member organizations** collaborated with experts from the Hands-on Inclusion project (Verso in partnership with LEVL). The program focused on three key themes: **Inclusive Recruitment, Inclusive Workplace, and Inclusive Change Management**. The objective was for participating organizations to assume responsibility for implementing follow-up actions within their own structures by integrating the acquired knowledge into their policy and work culture (NGO-Federatie, Jaarverslag, 2023). In 2024, for example, NGO-federation organized a training with Disrupt Development on equitable partnerships and concretely shifting power. Furthermore, the [Power Awareness Tool](#) (2025) allows NGOs to analyze how power dynamics unfold and is a practical tool to discuss, analyze and shift these power dynamics with partners and colleagues abroad.

Working Groups and Peer-to-Peer Exchanges

Beyond these broad trajectories, there are specialized working groups and peer-to-peer exchanges dedicated to specific aspects of anti-racism and decolonization. In this section we offer a non-exhaustive list of these initiatives organized by NGO-federation and 11.11.11 which can be useful to NGOs.

The Decolonization Working Group of NGO-federation and 11.11.11 on **Decolonization, Equitable Partnerships, and Silo-Breaking** (Ontkoking), for instance, dedicated an entire session to the **what, why, and how of inclusion**. This working group also organized training on **allyship and "safer rather than just braver spaces,"** facilitated by LEVL, where participants reflected on how to address themes like inclusion, LGBTQIA+ rights, and decolonization in an international context. This is particularly relevant for NGOs working with partners abroad who face diverse cultural and institutional settings where these themes can be sensitive or controversial (NGO-Federatie, Jaarverslag, 2023). They also established a working group on **gender and inclusion**, explicitly addressing the topics of gender and inclusion with a decolonial lens

For leading officers and program coordinators, NGO-federation organizes **structural peer-to-peer exchanges on decolonization and equitable partnerships**. For example, one of the peer-to-peer exchanges for leading officers focused on the research "Shift the Power," which explored how to structure partnerships more equitably. This addresses the core of decolonization within the development sector, the re-evaluation of historically entrenched power imbalances between Minority World and Majority World organizations. Another instrument are the structural peer-to-peer exchanges for employees in fundraising and communication functions. One example was a session on

the anti-racism video and inclusive communication commitments of *Médecins Sans Frontières*-Norway as inspiration. Another example is a specific **peer-to-peer exchange group for general directors** to target general directors specifically. This targeted approach for different functions and levels within organizations acknowledges that inclusion and anti-racism must be translated to the specific responsibilities and challenges of various roles (NGO-Federatie, Jaarverslag, 2023).

The working group on “**Decolonization, Equitable Partnerships and Silo-Breaking**” organized by NGO-federation and 11.11.11 represents an **interesting development** within the sector. This working group leads the decolonization agenda and identifies the needs within the Dutch-speaking NGO sector, enabling the sector to take targeted actions. For example, the group highlighted the importance of organizing peer-to-peer exchanges tailored to specific roles, ensuring that responsibility for decolonization is shared across different functions and positions. This approach helps prevent decolonization from becoming the task of only a small group and instead promotes its integration throughout the entire sector.

The separate **peer-to-peer structures**, which facilitates the horizontal sharing of experiences, best practices, and challenges, has the **potential to disrupt traditional power dynamics** often characteristic of top-down knowledge transfer. This mode of reciprocal learning creates space for **organic knowledge exchange** and can contribute to the dismantling of **hierarchical relations** within the sector. The emphasis on sharing both successes and ‘pitfalls and challenges’ suggests a **willingness towards vulnerability and reflection**.

The **function-specific segmentation** of the peer-to-peer exchanges demonstrates a **nuanced understanding** of organizational dynamics. By creating separate groups for general directors, management, and communication/fundraising staff, the approach acknowledges that decolonization presents **distinct challenges and opportunities** depending on one's position in the organizational hierarchy. This differentiation may be **more effective than one-size-fits-all approaches**, allowing organizations to develop **function-specific strategies** (Watson-Thompson et al., 2022; Hassen et al., 2021).

However, there is **no explicit reference** to the involvement of individuals with **lived experience of racism, colonialism, or from diaspora communities** in leadership roles within these platforms. Therefore, a further sustainable step would be to enhance the structural participation of BIPOC leading officers in these peer-to-peer exchanges and other platforms. Their participation is particularly valuable, as they are the individuals most directly and profoundly affected by colonial structures. Furthermore, this to avoid that the same groups that have been traditionally dominant in the sector unilaterally shape the decolonization agenda.

Other tools

In addition to these tools, employees are informed and sensitized through various formats such as **integrity awareness campaigns** (via office posters), **inclusion and decolonization working groups**, **allyship training**, **inclusion learning trajectories**, information sessions for integrity advisors, and tailored sensitization sessions for specific teams focusing on particular themes (NGO-Federatie, Jaarverslag, 2023).

Simultaneously, it must be recognized that this type of specialized offering is not always available directly from the sector itself. Training on more specific themes is often organized at the request of individual organizations or arises from the **initiative of motivated employees and management**. This places the responsibility explicitly with **management**, which possesses the motivation and mandate to initiate and facilitate such trajectories. Without this **internal motivation and strategic embedding**, anti-racism policy often remains a matter of good intentions without concrete implementation. Practice shows that organizations successfully pursuing anti-racism do so based on a clear strategic choice by management, which is then translated into **concrete objectives, budgets, and time investment** (Okatta et al., 2024).

A **crucial question** that arises is the extent to which these tools are genuinely **known and utilized** within the sector, and by whom and how they are applied. The mere **availability of instruments** does not automatically guarantee their application. Research into the **awareness, accessibility, and practical utility** of these tools is essential to understand the **gap between policy and practice**. The peer-to-peer exchanges and the Working Group are actively disseminated within the sector. They are **promoted** several times a year through the newsletters of the NGO-federation and 11.11.11, which are distributed to all member organizations. In addition, new employees in the NGO sector are systematically invited to participate in these platforms and receive an introduction to integrity and decolonization during the federation's onboarding days. Despite these efforts, participation and uptake largely depend on voluntary engagement. As a result, the extent to which these initiatives are structurally embedded in organizational policies and practices, particularly at the level of management and policymaking, remains uneven. Their translation into concrete changes in work processes, communication practices and organizational culture therefore varies across organizations. **Our conversations with employees, as shown in the next section, reveal this knowledge is not always used widely enough in the sector, or sufficiently reflected upon.**

A. Interpretations and Perceptions of Racism

When discussing racism in the NGO sector, many research participants perceived incompatibility between the self-image of NGOs as actors of human rights, solidarity and social justice and the existence of racism. This normative self-understanding contributes to a widespread assumption that racism cannot meaningfully exist within the sector's own organizational structures. As a result, racism tends to be denied, minimized, or rendered invisible by non-BIPOC staff rather than explicitly acknowledged and addressed.

This tendency manifests in the reluctance to name racism directly. Instead, incidents that involve racialized harm are commonly reframed using more neutral or depoliticized language, such as **misunderstandings, humor, cultural differences or individual insensitivity**. Within this framing, practices with racialized implications, such as the debate around *Zwarte Piet*, are frequently dismissed as harmless traditions or dark humor.

"I told them it was a racist representation and that black face was offensive. They didn't see the problem. Told me it was only Belgian folklore and a celebration for kids".

At the organizational level, racism is often displaced onto other, more **socially acceptable categories of inequality**. Discussions of discrimination tend to **prioritize gender, disability or educational background**, while race and racialization remain particularly difficult to place on the agenda. This displacement reinforces the idea that racism is either secondary or already addressed, rather than a structural concern requiring sustained attention.

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

"In our recruitment policy, we have a clause of non-discrimination on age, gender, race, religion. That's in black and white. But there's no training, no sensitization. It depends on the personal sensitivity of colleagues."

Furthermore, findings show that racism is predominantly understood as an **individual-level issue** rather than as a systemic or organizational phenomenon. Formal commitments to anti-discrimination are typically embedded in policies and charters, yet these are rarely accompanied by concrete training, institutional accountability mechanisms, or proactive strategies to address racism. The scope and operationalization of anti-racism vary. Responsibility for recognizing and responding to racism is therefore left to individual sensitivity and less embedded in organizational practice. An analysis of the existing **organizational codes** reveals that some

organizations explicitly adopt an intersectional perspective, linking anti-discrimination and anti-racism to broader institutional frames. Others embed anti-discrimination within a safeguarding or conduct framework, emphasizing individual accountability.

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

Across the interviews, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) emerged as the most dominant framework to discuss organizational change to tackle racism. Yet respondents repeatedly pointed to the **narrow, depoliticized and inconsistent ways** in which DEI is understood and implemented. Echoing Ahmed's (2012) critique of diversity policies as 'non-performative,' that is, policies that name change without enacting it, many NGOs formally embrace DEI, but in practice reduce it to vague commitments to 'equal treatment.' A recurring pattern that HR staff mentioned is the individualization of diversity. DEI is frequently framed in terms of individual qualities, competencies, or attitudes, rather than as a response to historically rooted power relations, whiteness and structural exclusion. As such, while DEI can be a starting point, it cannot interrogate colonial legacies and dismantle structural racism, in the same vein as anti-racist and decolonial lenses in organizations.

"...my thing is a bit, that it's often, okay, 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."

The findings further indicate a certain **discomfort** with equating DEI explicitly to racial background and discrimination. Race is displaced by other categories of difference, such as gender or disability. As Bhopal (2018) notes, such diversity agendas often avoid addressing structural racism directly, instead focusing on more palatable issues such as gender balance or socio-economic differences.

Finally, both BIPOC and non-BIPOC staff expressed skepticism toward existing DEI initiatives, describing them as overly abstract, jargon-heavy and insufficiently connected to concrete organizational practices. The lack of clear guidelines, accountability

mechanisms, and measurable outcomes undermines the credibility of DEI commitments, becoming a form of “lip service.”

C. Interpretations and Perceptions of Decolonization

The findings reveal that the concept of decolonization remains one of the most contested and misunderstood within the NGO sector. Across interviews, decolonization was frequently perceived as either **historically irrelevant, overly politicized, or incompatible** with NGOs self-image as progressive organizations. As a result, the concept often fails to function as an operational framework for organizational change.

A dominant interpretation frames decolonization as something that **belongs to the past**, rather than being relevant for present-day organization practice. Relatedly, decolonization is often narrowly associated with Belgium’s colonial past in Congo, limiting its perceived relevance to other geographical contexts, contemporary forms of inequality, and ongoing colonial continuities within NGO work.

"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".

Additionally, decolonization is frequently dismissed because of its association with **activism**. Several organizations avoid the term altogether, opting instead for less “confrontational” language or subsuming decolonization under broader DEI frameworks. This conceptual resistance is reflected in organizational practice. Although some NGOs publicly

"The words are there, the principles are on the website and in our calls. But in practice, our governance does not reflect them."

reference decolonization in their mission statements, on their website or in their calls, research participants consistently identified a **gap between formal commitments and actual governance structures**. Senior leadership engagements were described as limited, with responsibility for decolonization initiatives often delegated downward. Often, **BIPOC employees are expected to take on responsibility** for advancing decolonial discussions, serving as educators or

representatives of “diverse perspectives”. Consequently, decolonization work risks remaining symbolic or project-based.

D. Point of Reflection: Global Events and Organizational Discourses

Colonial and imperial interventions, or concrete manifestations of imperialist power, are an ongoing reality in certain parts of the world. As this context shapes NGOs work, whether they work directly or not with the impacted regions, it is not surprising that discussions on such contemporary events take place within NGOs, and impact on how organizations are perceived internally and externally. During the period in which the interviews for this study have been conducted, the genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza was ongoing, and many research participants have referred to conversations, perceptions and communications regarding the genocide within their organizations or more broadly in the NGO sector. Several BIPOC employees described how debates regarding the use of terms such as “apartheid”, “colonization” or “genocide” to describe

the reality in Palestine reflect deeper tensions within their organizations; on the one hand, between institutional caution and, on the other hand, solidarity with people who have been or are still subjected to colonial violence.

BIPOC staff often played a key role in **introducing or defending the use of decolonial terms** in internal discussions, but they also described how this work comes with personal and professional risks. One BIPOC employee explained:

"I had to write reports about the situation in Palestine. As an Arab, I cannot remain neutral when speaking of that topic. But sometimes you have to follow the rules of your organization even if you disagree, and for example I wasn't allowed to use the word genocide when speaking of Gaza. Because I was told nor the International Court of Justice or any international judicial body had definitely confirmed it truly was a genocide, legally speaking. And if I did use the word genocide, I had to specify the content I was producing was only reflecting my own views. It was very frustrating as a person from an Arab background. The people being slaughtered are like me."

This testimony highlights how personal identity and institutional policy may collide, producing moments of deep ethical tension. Staff members from Arab or Muslim backgrounds often described the emotional toll of being **expected to remain silent or neutral** about atrocities that directly affect their own communities. As one employee puts it:

"Sometimes you have to follow the rules of the organization because you know that it will put them in a problem if they publish on their website using some words. But usually I'm always using these words, occupation for example."

The hesitation in communication in relation to Gaza was also in contradiction to the immediate solidarity BIPOC employees felt from their own communities and the broader public:

"Despite all the protests and the popular support, it took time to shift the campaigns about Gaza and how we communicated about it."

Another BIPOC research participant from a different organization drew a direct comparison between the institutional responses to violent events in Ukraine and in Palestine:

"There was a lot of tension around our communication on the Gaza war, which was ironic as we operate in the field of international solidarity. While the board did not hesitate to call out Russia and support Ukrainians in 2021, they were very reluctant to use certain words and be firm in condemnation when Israel started its aggression on Palestinians in 2023. BIPOC employees, especially Arab or Muslim, had to constantly fight in order to get that recognition. Things would have been much different and easier had there been non-white directors."

To the respondents, organizational neutrality appears as not always evenly applied: there is immediate advocacy for white, European victims of war which is considered humanitarian, while solidarity with colonized or racialized peoples is treated as politically sensitive. For many research participants, this perceived inconsistency exposed how whiteness still shapes what is considered as 'neutral' within their organization and within the NGO sector. The adherence of certain NGOs to a neutral ethos in an extreme and pressing case such as the genocide in Gaza was conflated with - and perceived as conceding to - the broader political reluctance to take immediate actions to prevent the genocide and support its victims, particularly when compared to the recent case of Ukraine in which victims had larger proximity to Eurocentric standards of whiteness. Even if this conflation was sometimes mistaken, the refusal of certain NGOs to adapt their discourse and their communication to the urgency of the situation has impacted the sense of belonging of BIPOC employees to the organization, as well as NGOs' broader image among external communities and stakeholders.

At the same time, some participants observed that the genocide in Gaza has helped opening up space for **long-overdue discussions on decolonization** and global solidarity. As one BIPOC staff member explained:

"They are really caring a lot about what is happening in Palestine. I mean, they are inviting these partners to come here and meet others. So in these discussions it's really mentioned... The historical issues between Palestine and Israel, they'll mention how they are doing all these violations there."

While these new conversations are still fragile, they show how moments of global crisis can push NGOs to confront their own contradictions and to question who gets to speak, what language is permissible, and how solidarity is defined. The debates around Palestine illustrate how discussions of concrete, contemporary manifestation of colonialism and racism remain politically charged within NGOs. BIPOC employees often act as catalysts for these conversations, yet they also carry the heaviest emotional and professional risks in doing so. The case of Gaza reveals both the limitations of institutional neutrality and the potential for transformation when staff and partners insist on connecting human rights language to decolonial and anti-racist realities. For the sector, this moment offers a critical opportunity to recognize that genuine solidarity requires a willingness to confront the unequal politics of empathy and open up more equal prospects of solidarity.

Recommendations (Set V): How to counter divergent perceptions about DEI? Official Codes to create a Baseline

The findings show that key terms such as diversity, decolonization, and racism are often used inconsistently and understood in very different ways across NGOs. DEI are generally seen as positive and manageable, while decolonization and racism are considered uncomfortable or politically sensitive. This creates confusion and limits meaningful change. For NGOs, it is important to develop a shared and clear understanding of what these concepts mean and how they relate to their work. Open conversations about terminology should be encouraged, allowing staff at all levels, especially those with lived experience, to contribute to shaping definitions and approaches. Organizations should also ensure that their external positions on justice and equality are matched by internal

practices and language, avoiding double standards in how solidarity is expressed. By using these concepts more consistently and thoughtfully, NGOs can strengthen both their credibility and their ability to create real change within their institutions and beyond. Furthermore, NGOs need clear and practical approaches that translate principles in vision statements into actions.

1. Creating a vision statement on anti-racism and decolonization

An anti-racism and decolonization **vision statement** can serve as a guiding framework for NGOs, clarifying how the organization understands and addresses racism and colonial power relations both externally and within its own culture. Such a vision statement provides **clarity about the organization's stance, creates a common language for staff and leadership, and offers protection against ad-hoc or defensive responses**. This vision statement can also be integrated in existing policy texts, clauses and codes.

The vision statement should be developed through a **deliberate and participatory process**, ensuring input from staff across all levels, including those with lived experience, while involving management and governing bodies to secure strategic ownership. Organizations can start by reflecting on their own history, practices, and partnerships, and by articulating clearly the values and principles that underpin their commitment to anti-racism and decolonization. Drafting sessions can benefit from real-world examples, discussion of concrete dilemmas, and iterative feedback loops to ensure that the language is meaningful and applicable in everyday work. External facilitation can help uncover blind spots and guide the process, ensuring the statement is both authentic and actionable.

To be effective, the vision statement must be **structurally embedded within organizational practices and policies**. It should guide HR processes, workplace well-being initiatives, partnerships, and internal decision-making, while remaining a reference point in daily operations such as onboarding, team reflection, and leadership development. Practical tools, like reflection questions, case studies, and checklists, can support staff in translating the vision into concrete behaviors, and space should be created for ongoing dialogue about tensions and dilemmas that arise during implementation. By integrating the vision statement in this way, NGOs can strengthen their internal coherence, operational effectiveness, and societal impact, ensuring that commitments to equity and justice are more than aspirational statements.

2. Integration of Anti-Racism into the Strategy and Core Operations

The lack of structural integration of anti-racism into the mission and core operations of many organizations suggests it is often treated as a supplementary theme rather than a **fundamental principle**. Anti-racism must be **embedded in the mission, vision, and strategic objectives of organizations**, transforming it from an optional or temporary focus into a guiding principle for all activities and decisions. This requires adapting policy documents, strategic plans, and operational procedures, along with allocating adequate budgets and personnel capacity. Only when anti-racism is recognized as a prerequisite for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the work will this structural approach ensure that integrity and anti-racism become continuous components of the organizational culture,

rather than one-off points of attention. This principle was stressed by multiple HR officers throughout the empirical phase of this research.

"The challenge that we have discussed when trying to diversify the workplace, is how to include that in our inclusion policy? We came to the conclusion that inclusion is supposed to be the cement between all the bricks of the organization, it's not only one brick. It should be an overarching principle linking different parts of the organization. The idea is to ask ourselves 'what does HR and inclusion mean? What does finance and inclusion mean? What does comms and inclusion mean?'"

Ultimately, this cultural change implies that anti-racism efforts should no longer be the responsibility of a few individuals (such as the managers, the external coaches hired for decolonization workshops or the BIPOC employees themselves), but that anti-racism should involve the efforts of the entire organization. Some NGOs have already been successful in implementing anti-racism as an overarching, transversal principle of their work, across departments and expertise. We recommend other NGOs to follow suit.

3. From theory to action

The scope of awareness-raising (sensitization) extends beyond the organization itself. Through vision statements, integrity clauses or other codes in contracts with partners, NGOs bring relevant themes to the attention of external partnerships and encourage them to adhere to certain norms and values, creating a **shared frame of reference** that establishes the basis for fair and transparent cooperation. This is particularly relevant in **international partnerships** where different organizational cultures and legal frameworks intersect. This mechanism offers an opportunity to include anti-racism as a focus area, but it does not guarantee its inclusion within the clause.

These questions address the core of effective anti-racism policy in the NGO sector. It is insufficient merely to develop instruments and initiatives; there must also be investment in their implementation, safeguarding, and evaluation. This requires a structural commitment of resources, time, and expertise, but above all, a strategic vision from leadership that recognizes anti-racism as fundamental to the sector's credibility and legitimacy. The periodic cycle of sensitization and training employed by NGO-federation, which alternates annually between awareness sessions and training, serves as an example of how this structural embedding can take shape.

4. Developing a Sector-Wide Anti-Discrimination Agreement

The absence of an explicit **anti-discrimination agreement at the sector level** constitutes a significant policy gap. Such a clause should establish **binding norms** for all organizations within the sector, creating clear standards for commitment with sanctions. It must extend beyond general principles to include concrete obligations regarding **recruitment, internal procedures, partnerships, and program work**. Furthermore, it should stimulate consequences for non-compliance and establish a mechanism for external review to strengthen credibility and enforcement. Lastly, it is crucial to note that this anti-discrimination agreement should be based on **existing practices** coming from the Majority World, so that the knowledge and experience that already exists in the Majority World are valued. Otherwise, there is a risk to impose an

agreement at the Belgian sector level without taking into account the expectations of partners or colleagues abroad.

A concrete example of an international decolonization pledge is the [Pledge for Change](#). This pledge is built around three core commitments: Equitable Partnerships, Authentic Storytelling, and Influencing Wider Change. Together, these commitments seek to redefine the role of international NGOs within the global humanitarian and development system.

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

Several NGOs engage in diverse ways to tackle experiences with racism such as those discussed in the first section of this report. However, these attempts often face organizational resistance, or do not receive the organizational resources or support needed to execute them efficiently. In this section, we examine organizational barriers in NGOs to the implementation of anti-racism efforts, as a first step in dismantling these barriers and nurturing more efficient and comprehensive anti-racist action.

A. Tensions between DEI Efforts and Organizational Expectations

A recurring internal barrier identified across interviews is the perceived tension between DEI goals and organizational expectations related to efficiency, performance, and resource management. While DEI are endorsed at the level of values and principles, they are frequently framed as difficult to reconcile with operational demands, tight budgets and workload pressure. As a result, DEI is positioned as an **additional, sometimes inconvenient, burden** instead of a core organizational responsibility.

"People don't have allocated time. It's supposed to be integrated in what you do, but it's a very big challenge... Developing something and having it transversal requires work, analysis, and reflection. It's not impact-neutral .. it's extra work."

Many research participants, particularly those in HR and management roles, described DEI initiatives as creating extra work without corresponding **allocations of time, staff capacity, or resources**. Efforts to embed DEI transversally across recruitment, training, and daily practices were often portrayed as labor-intensive. In addition, the latter was met with resistance as a vast majority of HR officers and leading officers described "education and professional skills" as the primary and most legitimate criteria in recruitment. This 'competence-first' argument,

"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."

while presented as neutral and fair, was perceived by BIPOC staff as a way to deflect responsibility for addressing structural inequalities.

This meritocratic logic ignores how access to education and professional networks is in itself uneven. As the literature also highlights (Elloukmani et al., 2023), equating diversity with lowered standards implicitly reinforces the idea that whiteness and professionalism are synonymous. It also allows organizations to reproduce structural inequalities while claiming objectivity. Measures that could mitigate bias, such as **anonymized recruitment, tended to be dismissed as impractical due to capacity constraints**.

The tensions between diversity efforts and efficiency also surfaced in discussions around **language policies**. In some organizations, DEI initiatives encouraged greater linguistic inclusion, especially for staff in partner or country offices, but these efforts have been increasingly perceived as inefficient, costly or disruptive to smooth operations. At the same time, staff outside Belgium are expected to adapt to dominant European languages, highlighting how certain languages remain privileged over others.

B. Absence of Organizational Processes

In the policy-analysis and across interviews, one of the most recurring findings was the absence of clear, structured procedures or institutionalized mechanisms to address racism, discrimination and DEI within NGOs. Despite growing awareness and public commitments, most organizations still lack clear pathways for ensuring accountability or implementing anti-racist strategies. In addition, the most recent data of 2020 demonstrates that **12.3%** (of 106 respondents) report the presence of a **successful diversity policy** within their organization (Truddaïu et al., 2020 in Van Aacker & Willems, 2020:16). For example, one NGO has an **action plan dedicated to combating institutional discrimination**, focusing on:

- **Recruitment of diverse profiles**, particularly in **senior and management positions**.
- **Improved data reporting and analysis** concerning the workforce composition and its evolution.
- **Inclusive communication and visual representation** guided by a **DEI communication guide**, DEI language guidelines, and the use of a feedback group during campaign production development, among other initiatives.

"When it comes to racism and stuff like that, I think of course I could go [to the confidant]. But it's not that we have a separate or specific procedure—not that I'm aware of. And I think there you touch on a good point, because we're a big organization... I think it exists, but people are not aware. It's not like fully well communicated."

In most NGOs, responses to racism or discrimination are governed by general codes of conduct or charters of values. Where formal mechanisms do exist, they are poorly defined, insufficiently communicated and **rarely known or used**. As a result, staff members are often uncertain about where to turn, how incidents should be handled, or what follow-up can be expected. When attempts to formalize change, for instance reviewing the HR screening methodologies, do occur, they are more likely to encounter resistance, and therefore they often remain informal or semi-formal.

In addition, research participants discuss a shared concern of the **material and participatory limitations** that undermine anti-racist efforts within NGOs. They repeatedly emphasized that even when the will to address racism exists, it is rarely matched by adequate funding, staffing, or organizational support. Financial and structural constraints were frequently cited as reasons for stagnation, resulting in stalled initiatives, under-resourced working groups, or **reliance on unpaid and voluntary labor** (cf. section 3.A). Similarly, **financial limitations** were cited as an excuse for inaction. A broader structural dynamic is visible in which financial scarcity becomes the reason for deprioritizing anti-racist work. Budget cuts not only limit access to anti-racist expertise but also shift the burden of anti-racist work onto employees themselves, especially those already invested in the issue.

The **lack of dedicated resources and structural mechanisms** to ensure consistent follow-up, enables the responsibility for diversity and anti-racist efforts to fall on **individual voluntary initiatives**. Even when more systematic procedures are in place, they often rely on the willingness of individuals to assist in their implementation rather than allocating organizational resources. Importantly, the burden of this informal labor falls disproportionately on BIPOC employees and a small group of highly engaged staff or allies, who often feel compelled to initiate change while continuing their regular responsibilities.

This unpaid and emotionally demanding work is frequently experienced as exhausting and overburdening.

In sum, the absence of clear policies, defined responsibilities, and institutional accountability mechanisms undermines DEI and anti-racism efforts. Without formal procedures, implementation remains inconsistent and dependent on individual initiative; most often by BIPOC or engaged staff who carry the burden of change on top of their daily workload.

"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"

C. Dysfunctional Mechanisms and Policies

Although all NGOs examined in this study formally commit to anti-racism through internal policies and training programs, these are often implemented in ways that are perceived by staff as insufficient, inconsistent or lacking credibility. While such mechanisms are intended to create safer and more equitable work environments, the policy analysis and interviews highlight several dysfunctions that hinder their effectiveness in practice. This section discusses four major problem areas that were identified throughout the research: (a) mistrust in reporting mechanisms, (b) inefficiency of the trust-person mechanism, (c) flawed anti-racism and decolonization training, and (d) limited access to resources and decision-making spaces.\

C.1. Mistrust in reporting mechanisms

Existing mechanisms

The Legal Basis: Formalization of Integrity Standards

The **Belgian Royal Order of 28 February 2023** marked an important step in formalizing integrity standards in development cooperation by elevating the existing integrity charter to a legally binding national framework and establishing a central reporting point with a clear sanctions policy. Through this framework, integrity obligations are formally communicated to organizations and their partners via an integrity charter and contractual clauses (Ngo-federatie, 2024).

The current integrity charter does **not give a definition of the term integrity** but rather gives some non-exhaustive examples of integrity violations, for example abuse, fraud and corruption. Other integrity violations, such as racism, are not explicitly mentioned, and yet fall within the framework of integrity and the integrity charter.

The integrity charter obliges NGOs to use an ethical code in the context of development cooperation, but adopts a partly voluntary approach concerning its substantive content. Organizations autonomously determine their ethical values and priorities based on basic principles and approach in this charter. This promotes engagement, organizational ownership and contextually relevant ethical frameworks, and prevents political actors from imposing their values or worldviews on NGOs, which would risk undermining their autonomy and contribute to the global trend of shrinking civic space. The downside of it is a potential for significant variation

between organizations, and lack of guarantee that themes such as anti-discrimination and anti-racism are systematically included in the ethical codes of all organizations. Our analysis showed that in practice these themes are widely present in organizational integrity charters across the sector, and yet they are missing in some charters.

The sector level:

The **central reporting point for abuse** is managed by the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. This point exclusively handles reports related to sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, even though the federations pleaded for a broader thematic scope when it was erected (a demand that was denied by the Federal Public Service). It does consequently not specifically apply to discrimination-related reports and complaints. Furthermore, its intervention is only activated when the primary organizational-level reporting point fails to adequately address the concern (Omzendbrief, 2024).

The organizational level:

Every organization is mandated to **maintain a complaint reporting point for integrity violations** with a clear and transparent framework for action, which must be publicly accessible on their website (Charter integriteit, 2024; Integriteitsbeleid ngo-federatie, 2025; Royal Order 28 February 2023). This mandate includes:

- Preventing integrity violations through preventive measures, training, and sensitization.
- Designating integrity roles (Integrity Officer, Integrity Advisor, Complaints Manager) for advice and reporting.
- Implementing a sanctioning framework.
- Ensuring continuous monitoring and improvement to comply with these measures and optimize the system.

Organizations publish their integrity-related reports in their annual reports, which include, for example, the number of reports and the types of integrity breaches. But limited information is available concerning the nature and number of reports by category (for example the type of discrimination). Reports are collected in an aggregated manner without further coding based on nature, domain, or intent. This lack of detail regarding the violations prevents in-depth analysis of the problem for future improvement. All reports are currently studied on a case-by-case basis.

Challenges expressed by employees

Although BIPOC respondents reported experiencing racism or discriminatory behavior, the vast majority indicated that they never filed a formal complaint and would be unlikely to do so in the future. Two main factors explain this reluctance: a **lack of awareness about existing complaint mechanisms** and **deep mistrust** in their fairness, effectiveness, and protective capacity.

First, several participants were unsure whether complaint mechanisms existed at all or lacked clarity about how they functioned and what outcomes they could expect. This points to a broader issue of **poor communication** around procedures, rendering them invisible. Second, and more fundamentally, many respondents expressed skepticism about organizational willingness to address racism in a meaningful way. This mistrust is systematic, as several HR staff report it extending to partner offices. Employees, both BIPOC and allies, reported that affected colleagues often shared experiences informally among themselves instead.

Reluctance to file complaints were sometimes rooted in concerns about potential retaliation or **negative career consequences**. In addition, some BIPOC participants emphasized that existing systems **focus narrowly on sanctions** rather than enabling collective learning or prevention. As a result, formal mechanisms were perceived as ill-suited to address the broader organizational dynamics that allow racism to persist.

C.2. Inefficiency of Trust-Person Mechanism

Existing mechanism

A trust-person is an employee of the organization that colleagues may refer to in order to bring up incidents they may face at work or with other colleagues. In theory, they provide a safe and independent space for employees to raise concerns and to offer advice or redirect them to the right resources. Constituting a more informal channel, it differs from the official reporting procedure, in which the possibility of filing an official complaint could be considered.

Challenges expressed by employees

In practice, however, research participants described this system as ineffective, undertrained, and compromised by personal relationships.

"You have to talk to your direct colleague, which 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."

Participants argue that since the trust person is a colleague whom all parties involved know personally, they do not feel comfortable being vulnerable or reporting a colleague's behavior. In small organizations, particularly, **interpersonal relations** overlap with professional hierarchies which may lead to self-censorship.

Research participants also pointed to the problem that most **trust persons are undertrained** and sometimes even perpetuate racist behavior themselves, therefore undermining their credibility and ability to act as a trust person. At the same time, trust persons also feel like they are put in this position without having the power to act and make a change.

"It's very informal... I can't intervene in anything. I just have to listen to what the problem is. And then at the end of the year, I have to report it to an external company... I don't have very much impact on something."

"I wouldn't honestly know if there is an instance available to report these kinds of remarks and there would be, I don't know what would be done about it. That I don't know. So I don't think there is any."

Recommendations (Set VI): Externalize Reporting Mechanisms

As the findings show, BIPOC staff resort to informal support networks among each other or look for allies amongst their white peers due to a lack of trust in the formal reporting systems put in place. It is therefore recommended to revisit the already existing reporting systems, and in particular to provide external reporting mechanisms.

To provide externalized complaint mechanisms, we recommend to consider the following steps:

- Establish an **external, independent reporting channel** alongside the existing internal one.
 - Ensure that victims have the **choice to report outside** the organization if they feel more comfortable and/or do not trust internal structures.
 - The advantage of external reporting mechanisms is that independent personnel (such as occupational psychologists, confidential counselors etc.) are **not direct colleagues**.
 - An external reporting mechanism can also more effectively **aggregate and analyze complaints related to racism** to inform evidence-based policy development.
1. Expand the mandate of existing sector-wide mechanism (Central reporting point for abuse)
 - Avoid fragmentation by extending the existing central mechanism that is currently limited to “sexual exploitation and sexual abuse”, so that it covers racism and other forms of discrimination.
 2. Ensure representation and competence among external staff
 - Ensure that the professionals receiving complaints include people who
 - Reflect the identities of those most targeted by racism
 - Have expertise in anti-racist and trauma-informed practices
 - Representation fosters greater trust and increases likelihood of reporting.
 3. Maintain accessible first-line support inside the organization
 - Provide multiple low-threshold contact options such as
 - Trust-person counsellors
 - Prevention advisors
 - Designated HR officers trained in anti-racism
 - These roles should be clearly communicated and easily accessible for questions and remarks without requiring a formal complaint.
 4. Professionalize first contact with reports

- Ensure that the first conversation is supportive as it increases the likelihood that victims will proceed with the process.
5. Communicate clearly and transparently about the process
 - Provide plain-language information on
 - Complainant rights
 - Anti-discrimination laws
 - Possible sanctions
 - Step-by-step procedures
 - Who handles each stage of the report
 6. Communicate anonymized summaries of past reports and resolutions to build organizational trust and deterrence.

Exit Interviews as Additional Reporting Tool

As several HR officers and BIPOC employees observed, many BIPOC staff tended to leave the organization early on in their employment, without any clear understanding if racism or a lack of anti-racist practices were a key factor in their decision to resign.

Based on this observation, one recommendation to further advance anti-racism efforts within Belgian NGOs is to **use exit interviews as an opportunity for feedback** in the matter. After BIPOC employees have resigned, they may feel they have less to lose and can afford to be more honest. Asking specific questions regarding their experience with racism as a BIPOC person within the sector and the organization, can be an impactful way for the NGOs to integrate **constructive criticism**, reflect on their practices, and refine them for future BIPOC hires.

Quick wins can include the introduction of a **standardized exit interview template** that explicitly addresses issues on diversity, inclusion, and racism. In some cases, interviews can be conducted by an **external facilitator** to increase trust and confidentiality. The collected data should be monitored on a frequent basis to identify recurring patterns and propose concrete follow-up actions.

C.3. Flawed Anti-Racism and Decolonization Training

A number of empirical studies shed light on the **inefficiency of diversity training** provided by experts to NGO staff, noting that these initiatives often fail to “revolutionize the workplace” (Sage-Dankemeyer, 2017). Typically, such trainings are one-off sessions that lack continuity and therefore fail to transform organizational culture in a sustained and meaningful way (LaFortune et al., 2023). The research participants of this study observe a similar pattern, describing these sessions **as sporadic, optional, and disconnected** from the organization’s core mission. The vast majority indicated they only attended these sessions once or twice a year, and that these were attended on a voluntary basis.

Training, therefore, serves primarily as a **tick-box exercise**, aimed at showing compliance with external expectations. As attendance is often voluntary, those most in need of confronting bias may not participate.

In many organizations, the available training sessions did not explicitly address racial inequalities or structural discrimination. Instead, they were framed under broader themes of well-being or interpersonal respect, without naming race or power directly. This depoliticization of anti-racism reflects a wider trend noted in the literature: diversity and inclusion are often reframed as neutral **'soft skills,'** detached from histories of colonialism and institutional bias (Ahmed, 2012). In some cases, such trainings did not address the organizational needs, and risks being perceived by BIPOC employees as an extra **burden**. Moreover, most respondents emphasized that these trainings are **disconnected** from continuous professional development. Few organizations had integrated anti-racism or decolonization into their broader mission statements or annual staff learning plans. This 'project-based' approach to learning, such as optional one-off workshops, undermines long-term impact. As the literature repeatedly stresses, short-term awareness sessions are largely ineffective in transforming structural cultures of racism (Ahmed, 2012; Cascant-Sempere, 2024).

Despite these shortcomings, respondents consistently recognized the **positive influence** of umbrella organizations such as 11.11.11 and NGO-federation. These organizations were widely viewed as catalysts for internal change, filling the educational vacuum left by individual NGOs. **Collective spaces** at the sectoral level, where organizations can exchange experiences, share practices, and engage with experts, can play a crucial educational role.

Recommendations (Set VII): How to Design and Implement Anti-Racist Training that Works?

Previous research recommends that if NGOs want to treat racism as an organizational problem, they should translate their diversity training into a continuous Learning and Development process as part of the NGO activities, rather than one-off sessions with no follow-up (LaFortune et al., 2023). Weisinger et al. (2016) also warn against a “one-size-fits-all” approach when it comes to designing and providing diversity training. External trainers, often hired as experts, may have little familiarity with the organization’s internal culture or team dynamics, which can undermine their legitimacy in the eyes of staff. This dynamic reproduces a paradox where external experts are assumed more competent to produce knowledge on the organization’s diversity, while the lived experiences and situated expertise of staff, in particular BIPOC staff, are undervalued.

As Weisinger et al. (2016) argue, treating NGO staff as ‘blank sheets’ to be filled with standardized content overlooks the structural and historical realities that shape each organization. To avoid this, they recommend that learning and development processes should be **tailored to the specific institutional context** and built on the **experiential knowledge of the employees** themselves. Contextualized training can better acknowledge the unique cultural, political, and organizational conditions that influence how diversity and equity manifest within each NGO.

Some examples of trainings with a focus on anti-racism, decolonization and BIPOC employees that can be followed include: Privilege and micro-discrimination, inclusive HR policies, inclusive recruitment and retention, workplace inclusion, allyship, braver and safer spaces, minority stress, and inclusive communication (please find specific methods for organizing training sessions in the toolkit).

What do we learn from this?

The findings reveal that the main barriers to anti-racist progress in the NGO sector are not necessarily a lack of awareness but mostly a lack of structure and accountability, leading to a lack of trust in existing processes. Many organizations have policies, complaint systems, or trust-persons on paper, yet these mechanisms often fail to function as safe, credible, or independent spaces. BIPOC employees rarely report racism, not because it does not happen, but because they do not believe the system will protect them. Trainings, when they exist, tend to be optional, short, superficial, and/or disconnected from the organization’s core mission, raising awareness without changing power dynamics. Funding shortages are often cited as a reason for inaction, revealing the need for structural adjustment and the integration of anti-racism and decolonization in NGOs’ goals and operations.

Part IV: Structural Challenges Impacting Anti-Racism Efforts in the Belgian NGO Sector

While many internal organizational barriers stem from limited prioritization or lack of resources, research participants also highlighted a set of **structural challenges beyond the control of individual NGOs** that strongly constrain their capacity to sustain anti-racism work. These include financial insecurity, restrictive funding models, and power asymmetries embedded in the broader architecture of the NGO sector, the Belgian state (including the various levels of government), and the relations between them.

A. Finances and Budget Constraints

Financial constraints and prioritization have emerged as the most frequently discussed barriers. The vast majority of research participants have expressed concern regarding the announced federal upcoming funding cuts by the current ruling coalition in Belgium (the “Arizona” government), which will have major impact on several sectors, and include specific cuts aimed at the NGO sector. This decrease in budget will, according to them, inevitably impact anti-racism and decolonization efforts. When asked about the existing anti-racism, DEI and decolonization efforts within their organization, multiple HR officers have expressed their willingness to do more in that area, but have explicitly justified their organization underperformance on these issues by a lack of financial resources.

Existing research teaches us that while NGOs often cite limited **financial resources** as a barrier to implementing diversity initiatives, research challenges this assumption. A study examining conservation and environmental NGOs (Meaux et al., 2021) conclude that smaller organizations should not be exempt from doing diversity work and suggest ways to take meaningful steps within their means, such as incorporating diversity in their mission statement or showcasing diverse leadership on their websites. These actions, though modest, help open up conversations and signal a genuine institutional commitment that does not depend solely on large budgets (Meaux et al., 2021). In the box below, we indicate some financial resources that already exist in the sector and can be utilized by NGOs.

"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. So I would say that's the main link because we're under a lot of pressure from the staff. Quite honestly, we've just come out of a strategic week where all the international operations managers came together and the subject was discussed. So the subject of decolonization and diversity is much debated internally."

While they regretted the lack of resources to tackle racism within NGOs, a sizable share of BIPOC employees we interviewed saw the potential to use funding opportunities as a powerful leverage for action. Several respondents expressed their desire to see access to certain grants and funds conditioned on extensive decolonization work, therefore using financial resources as a means of pressure to make the sector prioritize anti-racism, and **involving policy makers and decision makers** for a greater impact.

Beyond overall funding shortages, respondents also pointed to the **structure of funding schemes themselves** as a significant barrier to decolonization. In particular, grant

requirements often mandate partnerships between a Belgian organization and a partner institution in the Majority World, yet decision-making authority and financial control tend to remain concentrated with the Belgian actor. In practice, the Belgian organization is typically designated as the main contact point of the donor and receives the funding, which is then redistributed to the partner institution. This arrangement creates asymmetrical dependencies, as partner organizations become financially reliant on their Belgian counterparts rather than operating as equal partners. While respondents acknowledged that such structures may be driven by administrative or legal constraints, they emphasized that these funding mechanisms nonetheless reproduce power imbalances and limit the realization of genuinely equitable partnerships. As such, current grant architectures were identified as an important, yet often overlooked, structural factor undermining decolonization efforts within NGOs. These findings have been confirmed in the study "Rebalancing Power: An Analysis of Equitable Funding Models and Their Implications for Belgian NGOs" (2025) commissioned by NGO-federation and ACODEV.

Recommendations (Set VIII): How to Get Around Financial Constraints? Building on Existing Resources

Resource constraints related to budget and available staff have often been used as an argument to justify the lack of anti-racism, DEI and decolonization efforts within the organizations included in this research. However, most of these organizations already have relevant processes in their structure that can be adapted, adjusted and improved, rather than replaced or created from scratch. In this section, we explore ways to make the NGO workplace more inclusive for BIPOC employees and retain BIPOC staff, minimizing resources by avoiding the creation of new initiatives and instead maximizing the impact of existing processes. This makes it possible to avoid overburdening NGO employees in terms of both finances and workload - all while advancing decolonization and anti-racism efforts. With this approach, we also follow the approach of some NGOs.

"The discussion was often 'let's not create extra work for ourselves'. You know, let's at least assume that everything can be improved. On the basis of good things, let's capitalize, let's improve. For instance, let's interrelate documents ... because there are too many policy documents that no one knows where to find."

1. Inspiration: Existing Frameworks against Gender-Based Discrimination

Most of the organizations included in this research have already done extensive work regarding gender-based discrimination. In certain cases, research participants declared their organization had implemented a framework to tackle gender-based inequalities and improve gender diversity and inclusion even before discussing decolonization and anti-racism. Our policy analysis has also shown that many NGOs already have a set of practices to prevent one type of discrimination among their staff, and from the interviews we learned that these practices have already adapted to the organizational structure and culture and are also more widely accepted by reluctant staff. Additionally, this study demonstrates that organizations have already learned from their gender-based initiatives previously implemented, meaning that they have already proof-tested, improved and

incorporated relevant elements to perfect them in order to increase their efficiency, as demonstrated by some of the participants:

"We have learned a lot from the gender projects which we have started with. For instance, it is easy to go against a person, so you don't put everything on the shoulders of one person. It is important to implement internal structures and processes: you don't link it to the management only, it's an effort of the entire organization... Link DEI efforts to the organizational processes. Internal conversations are also really helpful. We have also learned that as long as you don't touch the power structures nothing will change... Power mapping exercises are also really important and it creates evidence... We have noticed that When punishment is involved, the processes are inefficient."

In that framework, Belgian NGOs are encouraged to assess which processes, frameworks, initiatives and policies to address gender-based inequalities can be adapted and applied to tackle race-based discrimination. They are also encouraged to consider the lessons learned from initiatives around gender to improve already existing initiatives against racism.

2. Better Communicate about Existing Mechanisms

Participants in this research have sometimes highlighted the fact that initiatives, processes and policies to tackle racial inequalities and discrimination existed within the organization, but employees were not always aware of them, did not know where to find relevant information, were unable or experienced difficulties in accessing these resources.

In order to bridge this gap, organizations are encouraged to better communicate about the set of tools available for BIPOC employees, their managers, their allies and the wider staff to refer to in case of need. This can be done in different ways, some of which were already proven to work in some of the Belgian NGOs included in this research.

Firstly, NGOs should include **anti-racism resources available within the organization and the sector as part of the onboarding process**. This is an efficient way to ensure that new BIPOC employees are aware of the tools at their disposal to report or tackle any incident. It is also important to include resources related to decolonization, which provide the necessary context to understand more concrete measures taken by the organization. Additionally, this principle stresses to new recruits the importance granted to anti-racism and decolonization by the employer.

Secondly, these available resources should be **reminded to the staff throughout the employment period**, for instance by creating reminder emails, to discuss this during team meetings or visual signs showcased in the office shared spaces - a best practice already implemented in certain Belgian NGOs included in this research.

Thirdly, NGOs are encouraged to **use the resources** and educational content on decolonization and anti-racism **developed by 11.11.11 and NGO-federation**. Beyond providing materials, umbrella organizations and federations can play a consultative and supportive role in assisting NGOs with the development of their own dissemination strategies. For example, they can take a role as a communication line, first point of

contact, legal support service - or a middle-man forwarding the demands to relevant stakeholders if resources do not allow them to fully take on that role.

Concretely, this may include advising NGOs on how to translate sector-wide principles or mechanisms into organization-specific communication and training strategies, supporting the prioritization and sequencing of actions, and providing guidance on terminology, framing, and minimum expectations. **Umbrella organizations and federations can also function as sounding boards**, helping NGOs assess whether their dissemination strategies are coherent with broader sectoral visions while remaining adapted to their organizational context.

On that note, some research participants from NGOs that are active across the Belgian language border, or maintain administrative and/or organizational ties with both regions/governments, have sometimes expressed the need for better alignment between the terminology and expectations of the umbrella organizations and federations on both sides along with Fiabel around issues of decolonization and racism.

Lastly, while good practices regarding transparency on anti-discrimination and inclusion actions exist, it is essential that organizations apply and **publicly communicate this transparency systematically**. Organizations should report/share periodically on their anti-racism efforts, including **concrete objectives, achieved results, and identified challenges**. This reporting must encompass not only quantitative data but also qualitative analyses of progress in organizational culture and work processes. This approach enables peer learning and signals a commitment to creating an inclusive workplace to potential candidates. This can be done as part of the working groups and/or peer-to-peer working groups.

B. Changing Political and Cultural Opportunity Structures

Previous research conducted within the Belgian NGO sector indicated that there is growing awareness regarding structural racism, partly due to external societal pressure such as #BlackLivesMatter (Van Acker et al., 2020). The increasing societal attention towards anti-racism is breaking down political and sectoral resistance, leading to greater consideration of the theme when new ideas are proposed, such as a mandatory, government-imposed complaints procedure and/or a reporting point. These societal trends represent critical opportunities to engage in structural anti-racism work. Indeed, a significant part of our research participants as well as the policy analysis confirmed that the world's **political climate** and events have a direct impact on the momentum suitable for work related to anti-racism and DEI efforts. Some shared having to be more careful and strategic with their decolonization advocacy due to the rise of **far right** governments and movements across the globe. Whereas others have repeatedly highlighted the **BlackLivesMatter** (BLM) uprisings as a favorable window of action for anti-racism work, which now seemed to feel lost, leading to regression.

"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".

Global politics also forces organizations to self-censor, as seen in the shift away from DEI terminology due to the political situation in the United States and the restrictions.

Sociologists of social movements identified transformations in political power structures and cultural schemes (e.g. framing strategies) as enabling or constraining the emergence, proliferation and success of movements. These insights also apply to NGOs, and particularly to the efforts of actors within the NGO sector to promote certain changes. Broader societal trends affect strategic decisions and priorities, and present a constraint but also an opportunity, as it allows broader publics to engage in dialogue with the sector.

C. NGO Status and Nature

Some research participants indicated that the **nature, status and structure** of their organization hinders certain decolonization and anti-racism efforts. In some cases, the nature or status of the organization creates a pressure to remain neutral and avoid controversy.

Employees of international organizations sometimes indicated that this structure shapes the ways in which the Belgian office can approach issues related to structural racism and decolonization:

"We are also working closely together with our international body [...]. And within that frame, we have a set of principles on how we work together with partner organizations because all of these also are partner organizations that are members of the [international organization]. And because of that, we depart from equal footage. So we have the same set of principles or our national or general secretaries have adopted these kinds of principles. So for us, it is the way we work with partners is then how we work with partner organisations, they work with us. So it's a bit of a common set of principles."

These complex contexts in which Belgian NGOs must navigate their decision making and concrete actions, reiterate insights from the academic literature regarding the **inefficiency of a one-size-fits all approach** when it comes to improving diversity and inclusion practices in NGOs and NPOs, and the need to adapt these to the **specific organizational structures and mechanisms** (Weisinger et al., 2016; LaFortune et al., 2023). Research underscored the importance of moving beyond standardized interventions toward a contextualized understanding of anti-racism, accounting for internal governance dynamics and the lived realities of NGO workers themselves. Contextual sensitivity is therefore essential.

D. Restrictive Migration Policies

The complexities of migration laws and policies in Belgium and the European Union create significant barriers for foreign skilled workers in the NGO sector. While NGOs often facilitate visa and residency processes, BIPOC employees described the experience as slow, unpredictable, and deeply unequal compared to their European counterparts. These legal frameworks not only restrict individual mobility but also reproduce the racialized hierarchies of global labor mobility, where white, western professionals are made mobile, while racialized professionals from majority world are immobilized by bureaucratic obstacles.

For non-European staff recruited by Belgian NGOs, relocation to Belgium is typically contingent upon **lengthy and complex procedures**, including work permit applications, visa approvals, and repeated assessments by authorities to determine whether a suitable candidate could not be found within Belgium. These processes can take months, significantly delaying professional

mobility and creating uncertainty for both employees and employers. Even once residency is granted, migration law shapes employment conditions in ways that further entrench inequality.

In contrast to European staff sent abroad, who are commonly classified as “**expats**” and receive substantial allowances, non-European staff relocating to Europe are classified as **local hires**, stripped of benefits that make international postings sustainable. In some cases, research shows that NGOs operating in Belgium have adopted informal exclusionary practices, such as only considering candidates who already possess the legal right to work in Europe, effectively closing the door to applicants from the Middle-East, Africa or Asia. This shift illustrates how migration law not only regulates borders but also disciplines employers, shaping recruitment strategies in ways that reinforce racialized inequalities (Boucher, 2020). Belgian NGOs themselves, therefore, are caught in a paradox. Several managers admitted that while they would like to recruit more BIPOC staff from the partner countries to come work into their Belgian offices, the **administrative burden of visa procedures** discourages them from doing so. Over time, this can create a culture of resignation, where NGOs treat whiteness and European passports as the path of least resistance. This aligns with previous research documenting racial-spatial segregation within NGOs. Physical and social segregation reinforces distinctions between “expat” and “local” staff, categories that often map directly onto racial and colonial hierarchies (Khotari, 2006; O’Neal, 2016). European staff’s mobility becomes a marker of privilege and authority (Kothari, 2006). In this way, whiteness is reproduced not only through discourse and policy but also through spatial and social boundaries that delineate who belongs where.

Here, what dissembles as neutral migration regulation functions as a racial filter: it makes the presence of BIPOC professionals in European offices increasingly exceptional, even in organizations that actively want to diversify their staff. It also demonstrates that NGOs, although they have been very supportive (“*they did their best to support me with the administration and got me a lawyer*”), may get exhausted by the administrative burden relegated to them by the state, further impacting the representation of BIPOC staff in the Belgian NGO sector.

These constraints extend beyond long-term employment to shorter professional mobility, such as participation in meetings, training or conferences in Belgium. Even when NGOs facilitate visa applications for short-term visits, approvals are often delayed or denied at the last minute, preventing staff from attending events that are crucial for professional visibility, networking, and career advancement. As a result, opportunities that formally exist on paper are frequently inaccessible in practice for non-European staff.

Taken together, these dynamics show how migration laws act as systemic filters that reproduce inequalities in the NGO sector. They

restrict mobility for non-European staff, delay or block career opportunities, and create a double standard where Europeans are celebrated as “experts” abroad while their non-European colleagues are treated as ordinary local hires when moving to Europe. This reproduces what Ahmed (2012) describes as institutional whiteness: whiteness is not only about numbers, but about whose mobility is facilitated and whose expertise is legitimized.

“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”.

E. Lack of Central Coordinating Body

At the macro-level, there is a **substantial deficit in specialized personnel support** for implementing anti-racism policy within the sector. Currently, a **central contact point** with robust expertise in anti-racism is lacking to advise, guide, and support organizations in developing and executing their policies. This gap in expertise infrastructure places HR departments in a precarious position, burdened with complex organizational change trajectories without being adequately equipped. The absence of a central expertise center or coordinating body represents a **critical gap** in the sectoral infrastructure requiring urgent structural solutions.

What do we learn from this?

NGOs face a wide range of structural restrictions that prevent or delay them from implementing anti-racist policies even when internal barriers are alleviated. Such restrictions include cuts in public funding, unfavorable public discourse, organizational commitments to governments and restrictive migration policies. The state thus plays a central actor in enabling or hampering anti-racist efforts in the NGO sector.

While state responsibility should not exempt NGOs from exercising their agency and ensure organizational implementation of anti-racist policies, they should also demand the state to actively support these efforts. At the same time, supportive public opinion can further facilitate anti-racist and decolonization efforts within the NGO sector and challenge state restrictions.

Recommendations (Set IX): How to Address Structural Barriers and Improve the Constraints Stemming from them? Aim high through Government Advocacy

Some research participants have highlighted the role that Belgium's federal and/or regional governments can play in enhancing or hampering anti-racist efforts in the NGO sector. As one participant pointed out:

*"You have to show this report to the government and include them in your recommendations. For me that's without what should be done, strong and impactful anti-racism initiatives and **efforts have to come from those who have political power to enforce them**"*

The major budget cuts to the NGO sector announced by the current federal and Flemish governments have already produced an **atmosphere of anxiety** in the sector that makes decolonization work more difficult than before. The way to generate change in the sector is not by cutting funds but by tying them to concrete measures to be implemented by NGOs to diversify the sector. In a reality in which screening for government funding and the formal recognition as a NGO to receive this government funding is partially outsourced to private accountancy and auditing firms, introducing new criteria should also be reflected in the screening mechanisms, and external service providers should only be recruited if they are able to take these criteria into account.

Additionally, migration law and the hardening of governmental migration policies pose a major obstacle to already existing efforts of NGOs to diversify their workforce. **Reforms of migration law** that enables better mobility and opportunities for people who reside

outside of Europe is essential to create diverse workplaces. It is also essential that the government develops specific measures aimed at the NGO sector, in consultation with the sector, enabling organizations to facilitate their employees' mobility across borders, whether for short-term professional visits or for long-term employment.

NGOs in the sector, umbrella organizations and federations are encouraged to make use of the findings and recommendations in this report to advocate for the needed structural changes at the governmental level.

Finally, the importance of supportive broader public discourse to realize the recommendations formulated in this report should be highlighted. The efforts of certain political forces to ridicule and obsolete movements and concrete efforts aimed to promote anti-racism, decolonization and diversity, should be met with insistence of the sector on these values, and with broadening the efforts to pose and disseminate alternatives. Creating alliances and providing support to other groups and individuals that are at the core of these movements is essential, along with finding ways to amplify their voices and impact. As the NGO sector relies not only on governmental funding, but in its foundation on public legitimacy and support, maintaining the public base for its operation is crucial to ensuring the sector's future.

Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations

When asked about their expectations for this concluding report, all research participants, and especially BIPOC employees, have asked for practical recommendations. They have all expressed their genuine desire to see change and their fatigue with empty promises:

"We don't want another report that will go unread and accumulate dust on our superior's desk"

Additionally, some have highlighted the importance of tailoring recommendations to the context:

"It would be nice to receive practical recommendations linked to specific situations we face at work. For instance, 'what to do when this happens'."

Our recommendations aim to respond to the expectations of the research participants, and to respond to the specific needs of the NGO sector. At the same time, throughout the recommendations we implement our analytical approach that perceives the endurance of colonial power relations and structural racism as detrimental in shaping internal dynamics and the level of diversity within the sector, across all organizational layers. Policies must be reoriented towards addressing the structural barriers that systematically exclude or disadvantage certain groups.

In this framework, we open this section with a general guide on how the ensuing recommendations should be implemented. Immediately after, we recollect and summarize the recommendations developed throughout the report in the same order, according to the thematic logic of the findings, while referring to their original location in the report. This creates for the reader an integrated and holistic set of recommendations, which can be implemented with the help of the toolkit that accompanies this report. The toolkit also provides concrete details regarding which actors should take responsibility for implementing each recommendation.

A General Guide to Successful Change: Implementation Strategies for the Recommendations

Disclaimer: Effective efforts to address racism and decolonization require a sustainable, multi-level approach. This entails coordinated action across macro, meso, and micro levels, combining policy initiatives with practical interventions. Focusing on a single dimension alone is insufficient to achieve meaningful and lasting change.

1. Learn from BIPOC Staff

When asked about their expectations from this report, participants in this research have expressed the necessity of **changing the overall power dynamics and structure** within organizations:

“There is a lot that us employees want to get done to fight racism but we are always faced with a glass ceiling as soon as our requests and grievances reach the hierarchy. And the very few mechanisms that are supposed to include us in the decision making process are very flawed. The main problem is the power dynamics and imbalance: as long as it’ll be old white men exclusively making the big decisions, nothing will change. This is where you have to act in your recommendations. Change the composition of the boards, it’s one of the biggest leverages of power, but it needs to be made more inclusive.”

In addition, participants stressed the need for a **more systematic and integrated approach to anti-racism and decolonization**. Rather than treating these issues as isolated initiatives, respondents highlighted the importance of embedding them across organizational functions and disciplines, including human resources, finance, and communications. Such a transversal approach would allow organizations to move beyond symbolic commitments and translate anti-racist principles into concrete operational practices.

The current **limited collaboration with diaspora communities in Belgium and BIPOC staff (in Belgium and abroad)** represents a missed opportunity for knowledge sharing, perspective diversity, and legitimacy of the work. Organizations must enter into structural partnerships, treating them not merely as consultants or target groups but as equitable partners in policy formation, program development, and evaluation. This requires providing adequate resources, recognizing their expertise, and creating space for their participation in decision-making. Collaboration must extend beyond incidental projects and be interwoven into the strategic orientation and governance of organizations. “Nothing about us, without us.”

2. Implementation of Monitoring and Measurable Objectives

The lack of a structural or binding diversity and inclusion policy in many organizations is paralleled by the absence of **monitoring and measurable objectives**. Without reliable data, it is impossible to measure progress, identify bottlenecks, and make targeted adjustments. Establishing a clear monitoring framework is therefore essential for accountability and organizational learning.

NGOs should collect both **quantitative and qualitative data** related to diversity, discrimination and racism. This includes systematically **registering and analyzing**

discrimination reports, as well as conducting **employee surveys** that gauge experiences with discrimination, inclusion, and workplace safety. The data collection must fully respect privacy and include clear communication about the data's purpose and use. An interesting study conducted by UNIA (2024; 2025) elaborates how BIPOC employees can identify themselves and how employee diversity can be measured to achieve targets and collect data on the workforce composition. This is a method that can be implemented and used.

Quick wins can include the introduction of an **annual anonymous staff survey** on these matters, as well as the introduction of **diversity indicators** in HR databases. The latter refers to staff having the possibility to voluntarily include identity categories within the HR database, such as ethno-racial background. Collecting this data, in compliance with the Belgian anti-discrimination framework and GDPR, allows NGOs to monitor representation across departments, functions and seniority levels.

It is important to note that each NGO already possesses information that can be used to develop an overall picture on how they are doing when it comes to diversity and representation. **Reviewing recruitment statistics**, such as the amount of BIPOC candidates that applied, that were shortlisted and eventually hired, provides insight to take concrete action. If organizations already have trainings in place, **tracking training participation** can show whether knowledge on diversity, anti-racism and/or decolonization reaches all levels of the organization or remains concentrated among BIPOC and/or the 'usual suspects'.

Finally, measuring and addressing systemic racism in the selection phase through **correspondence testing**¹ is also recommended to provide valuable evidence of potential racism in hiring processes (UNIA, 2025).

3. Adopting a Context-Specific, Multi-Level Approach

At the policy level, it is crucial to **move away from a purely 'one-size-fits-all'** implementation of anti-racism and decolonization measures at organizational level, while still maintaining a coherent and uniform policy framework.

A uniform policy approach can be relevant in terms of shared principles, minimum standards, governance processes and regulatory expectations. However, the concrete application of these policies should remain **context-sensitive**. The effectiveness of interventions depends on organizational culture, internal power dynamics, available resources, and the readiness of management and staff to engage with these issues.

In practice, this means that certain elements can be standardized across organizations, such as reporting mechanisms, codes of conduct, accountability structures, or policy requirements, while other elements, including training trajectories, priority actions, internal change processes, communication strategies, the resources and willingness of the managers and staff to address these problems, need to be tailored to the specific organizational context.

Policy analysis should therefore distinguish between uniform policy frameworks and differentiated organizational implementation, particularly given that racism manifests in

specific ways within the development and humanitarian aid sector, requiring organization-specific responses rather than solely generic corporate guidelines.

Since every NGO has a unique organizational culture and power structure, policy must facilitate and finance **organizational customization**. This means making resources available for the development of **tailor-made diagnostic trajectories and multi-year action plans**, instead of imposing a single measure.

Finally, an effective strategy must be **multi-level**, with simultaneous interventions targeting the **individual** (implicit bias), **interpersonal dynamics** (microaggressions), and the **policy level** (HR procedures and partnership models). To ensure relevance and legitimacy, all interventions must be developed in **co-creation with and led by the communities** most affected by racism. Only by embracing this differentiated and layered approach can the sector achieve structural change.

It is **recommended** that organizations collect data concerning their operations, for instance, by conducting a **Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) scan** to ascertain specific needs within the workplace. Alternatively, they should commission an **external partner to conduct a risk analysis** to identify instances of **systemic discrimination**.

Based on this empirical data, a clear **anti-racism action plan** can be formulated, encompassing concrete measures executable both in collaboration with the sector and with external partners. Given that organizations may not always possess the requisite expertise, it is essential that they receive the necessary support in executing these assessments and subsequent action planning.

¹ Correspondence testing is a research method used to detect discrimination by sending equivalent applications (e.g. CVs or emails) that differ only in a specific characteristic such as name, ethnicity, gender, or age, and then comparing the responses they receive. Differences in callback or treatment rates are interpreted as evidence of discriminatory behavior in recruitment or other selection processes.

I. How to Address Micro-Aggressions and Everyday Racism? (p. 18)

Addressing the issue requires the implementation of structural and institutional change rather than mere individual efforts.

1. Introduce Mandatory Training on Micro-Aggressions, Everyday Racism, White Privilege and Positionality (p.18)

Training, often primarily as a **tick-box exercise**, aimed at showing compliance with external expectations. As attendance is often voluntary, those most in need of confronting bias may not participate - hence the mandatory aspect.

We recommend a different approach regarding the design and implementation of trainings pertaining to the issue, in order to go beyond the punctual, one-size-fits-all design. Belgian NGOs, the federations and umbrella organizations should therefore adopt a framework for anti-racism training which:

1. Invests into cross-sector programs, such as train-the-trainer programs, which are aimed to build internal expertise and decrease the reliance on external resources.
2. Is part of a continuous learning and development process.
3. Is adapted to different categories of employees depending on their jobs and fields.
4. Differs between BIPOC and non-BIPOC employees for initial reflection, processing, and positionality work.
5. Occasionally merges those categories of employees into mixed-group sessions for learning convergence, articulation of organizational commitments, and clarification of responsibilities.

2. Create "Active Bystander" Protocols and Skills (p.19)

In order to shift the responsibility from the individuals experiencing racism to the collective, we recommend providing employees with the right tools to intervene when witnessing harmful behavior. On the one hand, NGOs can train their staff in active bystander techniques by adapting and **implementing models such as the "4D" or 5D" model** that are widely used in antiracism education. These stand for: Direct, Distract, Delegate, Document, and Delay. On the other hand, given the impact and responsibility of managers to lead by example, Belgian NGOs are encouraged to make **bystander responsibility part of managerial expectations**. This can be done by introducing explicit evaluation criteria related to racial discrimination, requirements to report annually on actions taken to support an inclusive culture, and training provided to less responsive or unaware managers who need to strengthen their competencies and their commitment in this area.

3. Embed Anti-racist Commitments into the Onboarding Process (p.20)

Integrating anti-racism from the very start of an employees' journey within the NGO strongly contributes to shifting the organizational culture into a more inclusive and anti-racist environment. It sends a strong signal that anti-racism is not a peripheral theme but a core organizational priority, helps close the awareness gap, provides new recruits with a shared understanding of core concepts related to the issue, and eventually lifts the burden of BIPOC employees to educate their colleagues. These **onboarding modules** should be accompanied by structured reflection exercises, case-based learning and facilitated discussions.

4. Provide Long-Term Funding for Antiracism and Decolonization Efforts (p.20)

The structural and sustainable elimination of racism within organizations implies long-term investment, for which **targeted financial support** can be useful. Belgian NGOs are therefore encouraged to:

1. Allocate a specific budget to anti-racist initiatives, turning the issue into a priority with measurable results;
2. Shift the schemes from short-term or sporadic funding to long-term and structured funding. Indeed, long-term anti-racist trajectories, with measurable impact indicators, monitoring, and reporting, will have a greater influence than punctual support moments.

II. How to Recruit a Diverse Workforce? (p. 23)

Diversifying NGO staff does not only increase organizational performance through enhanced creativity, innovation and problem solving; it also responds to a moral and ethical imperative to correct structural inequalities – embedded in the social justice objectives at the core of NGOs missions. While doing so, Belgian NGOs should bear in mind that the following recommendations:

1. Are not unrealistic, as they have already been successfully implemented in other national administrations and organizations;
2. Should be implemented in a sustainable way, leading to genuine anti-racism and shared power while avoiding tokenism.

1. Reform Recruitment Practices (p.24)

Recruitment processes often reproduce systemic inequalities by overemphasizing employment criteria which often disadvantage BIPOC candidates. In order to avoid these effects, NGOs should:

1. Review and reflect on recruitment requirements in such a way that only skills essential to the positions are included. This can be facilitated by focusing on transferable skills, motivation and prioritizing lived experience in the candidate evaluations.
2. Adopt anonymized CVs to bypass the recruiter's unconscious bias. This can be done by utilizing standardized web forms that exclude unnecessary personal details, or by employing intermediaries to strip names and other non-essential data from CVs before they reach the selection committee.
3. Adopt innovative recruitment tools aimed to evaluate non-BIPOC candidates' awareness of issues related to race, racism and power relations during interviews.

2. Implement Positive Action (p.25)

Diversity quotas or targeted recruitment initiatives have proven to be a powerful tool to temporarily correct structural imbalances that systematically exclude BIPOC individuals, especially from senior positions. However, these measures must not be implemented in isolation but alongside an organization-wide policy following recommendations developed in the previous section. Concrete examples and best practices from the industry include:

1. Coaching provided to BIPOC individuals during recruitment procedures.
2. Internships and summer jobs reserved for specific groups with a guarantee of employment.
3. Establishment of a recruitment pool specifically for individuals with a migrant background.

4. Ensuring a minimum percentage of candidates from underrepresented groups advance to the interview stage.

3. Broaden Outreach and representation (p.26)

On the one hand, the way NGOs present themselves to the public can impact their ability to attract BIPOC candidates, who may or may not see themselves represented in the organization's values or staff. Organizations are therefore encouraged to **review and improve their communication strategies and marketing material** to ensure that they represent racial diversity. At the same time, it is crucial to make sure diversity is properly reflected in the organization's practices and translates into genuine anti-racist efforts. Otherwise, this posture risks tokenizing BIPOC individuals for reputational purposes. In addition, NGOs can collaborate with BIPOC community organizations and networks to advertise vacancies.

III. How to Retain BIPOC Staff?

While recruiting a diverse workforce is essential, it is equally important to create an environment where they feel valued and which fosters their wellbeing and professional development. The opposite can lead to high turnover among BIPOC staff, or to negative experiences at the workplace. In that sense, fostering a positive team climate, psychological safety, and anti-racist leadership is a key component of employee retention.

Introduce Transparent Employment Structures (p.28)

BIPOC employees have sometimes witnessed disparities in terms of recruitment, remuneration, benefits and advancement opportunities within NGOs, especially among partner-country offices. An efficient way to address these inequalities is for Belgian NGOs to commit to **full transparency in salary and qualification structures** by:

1. Publishing salary grids and qualification requirements on internal platforms. This way, all staff are able to refer to standardized and objective scales when considering their advancement prospects.
2. Conduct equity reviews on a regular basis in order to identify potential disparities, and to share these reviews internally along with commitments to address imbalances.
3. Involving staff representatives from both Belgian and partner-country offices in the design and assessment of these frameworks.
4. Organizing information sessions about the matter.

IV. How to diversify Leadership? (p. 26)

The benefits of appointing BIPOC directors and leaders have been widely recognized and demonstrated. Drawing on their own experience, they facilitate the implementation of anti-racist and decolonial practices within NGOs through their prioritization and support. Best practices identified include the creation of a mentorship culture for employees from underrepresented groups.

1. Create Targeted Internal Leadership Development (p.31)

Belgian NGOs are encouraged to develop a transparent leadership development pathway for underrepresented employees focused on core management skills, aligned with individual development plans, and supported by efforts to address exclusionary workplace cultures (such

as low psychological safety, tokenism, and lack of recognition for diverse leadership styles) to ensure the initiative is effective and attractive.

2. Identify and Support Role Models and Ambassadors in Management (p.31)

We recommend organizations to identify and support managers from diverse backgrounds to act as **role models and ambassadors**.

1. Their visibility should be strategically used in internal communication, recruitment campaigns, and leadership promotion initiatives.
2. Importantly, the emphasis should not be on individual success stories alone, but on the added value of diverse leadership for organizational performance, improved decision-making and innovation, and the broader societal relevance and legitimacy of inclusive leadership.

3. Implement Positive Action in Management Functions (p.32)

In order to diversify their leadership through positive action, Belgian NGOs can:

1. Use targeted positive action in management recruitment by partnering with organizations and channels connected to underrepresented groups, expanding the pool of qualified candidates beyond traditional recruitment pathways;
2. Deliberately select a BIPOC candidate when two or more candidates are equally suitable, with the aim of building a diverse and representative management team;
3. Prioritize a BIPOC candidate who meets core job requirements but scores slightly lower on some criteria, while offering targeted training or support. This recognizes potential, supports sustainable talent development, and maintains role effectiveness.

When adopting this approach, organizations should communicate clearly and transparently, both internally and externally, that this approach is grounded in the principle of equal opportunities aiming to correct structural inequalities suffered by BIPOC individuals.

V. How to counter divergent perceptions about DEI? Official Codes to create a Baseline (p.40)

This research highlighted divergent perceptions and understandings of concepts related to DEI, racism and decolonization. The following recommendations outline how NGOs can develop shared frameworks, foster participation, and embed anti-racism and decolonization into everyday practices.

1. Design and Implement a Vision Statement: From Theory to Action (p. 42-43)

In order to counter heterogeneous understandings of key concepts related to the issue, NGOs are invited to **elaborate an anti-racism and decolonization vision statement** which can serve as a guiding framework for NGOs. The vision statement should:

1. Clarify how the organization understands and addresses racism both externally and within its own culture. It provides clarity about the organization's stance, creates a common language for staff and leadership, and offers protection against ad-hoc or defensive responses.
2. Be developed through a deliberate and participatory process, ensuring input from staff across all levels, including those with lived experience, while involving management and governing bodies to secure strategic ownership. Organizations can start by reflecting on their own history, practices, and partnerships.

3. Be structurally embedded within organizational practices and policies. It should guide HR processes, workplace well-being initiatives, partnerships, and internal decision-making, while remaining a reference point in daily operations.
4. Be extended beyond the organization itself and brought to the attention of external partners, including international partners. This creates a shared frame of reference for fair and transparent cooperation.

2. Integrate Anti-racism into Organizational Strategy, Vision and Core Operations (p.42)

Anti-racism has to be embedded in the mission, vision, and strategic objectives of NGOs, transforming it from an optional or temporary focus into a guiding principle for all activities and decisions. This ensures that anti-racism, equity and inclusion become continuous components of the organizational culture and missions, rather than one-off points of attention. Applications of this commitment encompass:

1. Integrating anti-racism as part of other disciplines treated by NGO staff, related to topics traditionally considered as "separate". For instance, organizations can turn anti-racism into an overarching, transversal theme cementing all departments and activities together. This would lead to the design of strategic reforms around "HR and Inclusion", "Communication and Inclusion", "Finance and Inclusion", etc.
2. Adapting and reviewing policy documents, strategic plans, and operational procedures accordingly.

3. Develop a Sector-Wide Non-Discrimination Clause (p.43)

The absence of such a clause currently represents a significant gap. Its elaboration should:

1. Develop and adopt an explicit, sector-wide anti-discrimination agreement clause that sets binding standards for all organizations.
2. Move beyond general principles to concrete obligations in recruitment, internal processes, partnerships, and program work.
3. Define clear consequences for non-compliance and establish an independent external review mechanism to ensure accountability, credibility, and effective enforcement.
4. Be based on existing practices coming from the Majority World.

VI. How to Correct Dysfunctional Anti-Racist Mechanisms? (p. 49)

We present here two main strategies to correct dysfunctional organizational mechanisms aimed to tackle racism. A third strategy, specific training for HR staff, is explored thoroughly throughout the toolkit attached to this report.

1. Externalize Reporting Mechanisms (p.50)

BIPOC staff often resort to informal support networks among each other or look for allies amongst their white peers due to a lack of trust in the formal reporting systems put in place. It is therefore recommended to revisit the already existing reporting systems by:

1. Establishing an external, independent reporting channel alongside the existing internal ones.
2. Ensuring that 'victims' have the choice to report outside the organization if they feel more comfortable and/or do not trust internal structures

The advantage of external reporting mechanisms is that independent personnel are not direct colleagues. An external reporting mechanism can also more effectively aggregate and analyze complaints related to racism to inform evidence-based policy development. Implementation strategies of external reporting mechanism include:

1. Expanding the mandate of the existing sector-wide mechanism. For instance by covering racism in addition to sexual abuse and sexual misconduct.
2. Ensuring representation and competence among external staff who should reflect BIPOC identities and have expertise in anti-racist and trauma-informed practices.
3. Maintaining accessible first-line support inside the organization, clearly communicating these roles and making sure they are easily accessible (trust-person counselors, prevention advisors, designated HR officers trained in anti-racism).
4. Professionalizing the first contact: a supportive first conversation will maximize the likelihood that the victim goes through with the process.
5. Communicating clearly and transparently about the process (complainant rights, possible sanctions, etc.).
6. Communicating anonymized summaries of past reports and resolutions to build organizational trust.

2. Use Exit interviews as Additional Reporting Tools (p.51)

Many BIPOC staff tend to leave the organization in early stages of their employment. Oftentimes, organizations lack clear understanding if racism or a lack of anti-racist practices are a key factor in these employees' decision to resign. An efficient way to bridge this gap is to **maximize exit interviews with BIPOC** employees by asking targeted questions around experiences with racism, diversity and inclusion during their employment period. By using this momentum, organizations ensure the employee can speak more freely without fear of repercussions, all while improving their practices for future hires. Quick wins include:

1. Introducing a standardized exit interview template that explicitly addresses issues on diversity, inclusion, and racism.
2. Monitoring of that data on a regular basis to identify existing patterns.
3. If needed, interviews could be conducted by external facilitators to increase confidentiality and trust.

VII. How to Design and Implement Anti-Racist Training that Works? (p. 51)

To effectively address racism as an organizational issue, NGOs should transition from one-off workshops to a continuous Learning and Development process integrated into regular activities. Trainings should move away from "one-size-fits-all" models in favor of contextualized approaches that reflect the specific institutional culture and historical realities of the organization. Rather than over-relying on external experts who may lack internal legitimacy, NGOs should prioritize the experiential knowledge and situated expertise of their own staff, particularly BIPOC employees, to ensure training is not treated as a standardized 'blank sheet' exercise. Finally, these ongoing efforts should encompass a diverse range of specific topics—including inclusive HR policies, minority stress, and decolonization—supported by the practical methods outlined in the organizational toolkit.

VIII. How to Get Around Financial Constraints? Building on Existing Resources (p. 54)

The lack of financial and human resources and the burden stemming from them have often been

used as core arguments to justify the lack of anti-racist work within organizations. When possible, it is strongly encouraged that Belgian NGOs explore, improve and adapt the mechanisms that already exist to save money, time and staff - rather than creating costly, uncertain and workload-inducing new ones.

1. Use Existing Frameworks against Gender-based Discrimination (p.56)

The vast majority of Belgian NGOs had already adopted initiatives to foster gender equality long before decolonization initiatives were launched. These frameworks are often widely accepted by the organization's staff as legitimate (including by those who are not always/not fully on board), have already been adapted to the NGO structure, and have already proven to be efficient over the years. In that framework, organizations are encouraged to:

1. Assess which practices to address gender-based inequalities can be adapted and applied to tackle race-based discrimination.
2. Consider the lessons learned from initiatives around gender to improve already existing initiatives against racism.

2. Better Communicate about Existing Mechanisms (p.56)

While some organizations may have already developed a set of tools aiming to combat racism and foster a more inclusive environment, they sometimes fail to communicate these initiatives to their employees, who lack information about which resources are available. To supplement this gap, Belgian NGOs should:

1. Include anti-racism resources and accountability mechanisms available within the organization and the sector as part of the onboarding process. This is an efficient way to ensure that new BIPOC employees, their allies, their managers and the wider staff are aware of the tools at their disposal to report or tackle any incident.
2. Regularly remind the wider staff of those resources through newsletters, emails and visual material showcased in the organizations' facilities.
3. Use the educational content and tools developed by umbrella organizations and federations and consult them to develop their own (dissemination) strategies.
4. Publicly share and report on their own antiracism efforts, including concrete objectives, achieved results, and areas of improvement.

IX. How to Address Structural Barriers and Improve the Constraints Stemming from them? Aim high through Government Advocacy (p. 59)

While systemic barriers to anti-racism efforts described in this report may not depend on the NGOs' will and are out of their direct control, we strongly encourage the sector to use the research outcomes to advocate for the structural change needed at the government level. Arguments include:

1. Urging the government to **create funding systems** that are tied to concrete measures to diversify the NGO sector instead of cutting funds.
2. In this regard, advocating for a **review and reform of the screening mechanisms** used for budget policies. Indeed, external service providers assessing public funding should be required to account for these new (DEI-related) criteria
3. Pushing for **migration policy reforms** catered to the needs of the NGO sector, enabling organizations to facilitate their employees' mobility across borders, whether for short-term professional visits or for long-term employment.
4. Finally, Belgian NGOs should aim not only to convince the government, but strive to **disseminate anti-racist and inclusive values across broader public discourse**. Indeed, the sector heavily relies on public legitimacy and support - not only governmental funding.

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