

# TRANSFORMING FOR A RADICALLY BETTER WORLD

Oxfam's commitments to anti-racism,  
feminism and shifting power



OXFAM



# “LASTING CHANGE WILL ONLY HAPPEN IF WE GIVE AT LEAST AS MUCH WEIGHT TO HOW WE WORK AS TO WHAT WE DO”

**In 2020, we published Oxfam GB’s new strategy and set out our vision for a radically better world in which everyone has the power to thrive not just survive. We also acknowledged that radical, lasting change will only happen if we give at least as much weight to how we work as to what we do. We said that we’re committed to being an inclusive organisation that is truly safe, feminist and anti-racist.**

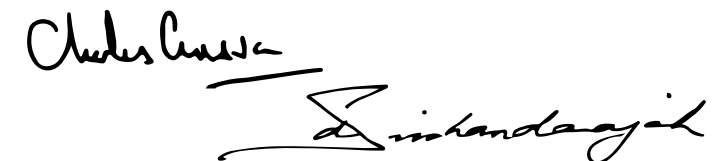
During the last year we’ve reflected on what we need to do and change to build the sort of organisation that will live up to these ambitions. We have been looking at how we approach equality, diversity and inclusion; how we evolve our approach to partnerships so that we truly shift power and resources to those we work with; and how we become an anti-racist organisation. Each of these areas will have its own more detailed strategy – as does our commitment to improve safeguarding.

What has become very clear in developing all of these strategies is that this isn’t about a new set of policies or another checklist here or there – this is part of a profound transformation of how Oxfam works. And we’ve had painful conversations with colleagues over the last year on their lived experiences within our organisation. At times, these haven’t been easy issues to raise and discuss, but we believe that journey to being an anti-racist organisation is critical – not just for Oxfam but for any organisation that wants to thrive and be relevant now and in the future.

We recognise that this journey is not just about what happens within Oxfam but also about how we work with our partners, the communities we serve, and all our stakeholders. Becoming an anti-racist organisation and shifting power to our partners is central to our charitable objectives of preventing and relieving poverty, and addressing some of the structures and systems of power that keep people in poverty around the world.

2022 marks Oxfam’s 80th anniversary and we’ve plenty to celebrate. Over the decades, Oxfam’s been at the forefront of many progressive changes – from talking about the gendered aspects of poverty, to standing up to the apartheid regime in South Africa, pioneering fair trade, and putting climate justice at the heart of our work. This strategy sets out how we’ll stay at the vanguard, showing what shifting power as a truly inclusive, anti-racist and feminist international organisation could look like.

This paper states our commitment, and our areas of focus for the journey ahead. There are actions we can take right now – many will need time, patience, and investment. Ultimately this is about radical transformation of our systems, structures, ways of thinking, and ways of working. We commit to taking the time, care, and self-reflection needed. And we ask all who work with us to join us and do the same.



**Charles Gurassa, Chair of the Board of Trustees  
and Danny Sriskandarajah, Chief Executive Officer**

**January 2022**

# On a page...

## WHY

We'll never overcome the global inequalities that fuel poverty until we tackle the racial and gender power inequalities that underpin them, and rebalance power between the global North and global South.

## HOW

This isn't just about the world around us – it means understanding how inequalities and an imbalance of power play out within Oxfam and the wider sector as well.

## WHAT

We promise to:

Redesign how we do things in order to address engrained inequalities

Remove behaviour that reinforces attitudes that discriminate and harm



Redefine ourselves to help rebalance power

Co-create solutions with and for the people for whom this change must be meaningful

# Our vision and commitment

## OUR VISION

At Oxfam, we believe in a kinder and radically better world, where everyone has the power to thrive not just survive. To achieve this, we must fight the injustices and inequalities that fuel poverty. We believe in a world of:

- **INCLUSIVITY** – where no one is left behind
- **EMPOWERMENT** – where power is shared fairly
- **ACCOUNTABILITY** – where we're held to account by those we work with

## OUR COMMITMENT TO ANTI-RACISM, FEMINISM AND SHIFTING POWER

To tackle the global inequalities that fuel poverty, we must address the racial and gender inequalities that underpin them. And we must actively shift power – money, resources, decision-making, mindsets – to our country teams, and the local communities and organisations we partner with around the world.

From the disproportionate impact of climate change on people in the global South, to the vastly unequal and unfair distribution of Covid vaccines around the world...

From expectations that put childcare responsibilities mostly on women's shoulders, to the ever-present gap between how men and women's work is viewed and valued...

...you don't need to look far into these injustices to find an imbalance of power between the global North and the global South – with racial and gender power inequalities at their core.

This is why, at Oxfam GB, we commit to becoming an anti-racist and feminist organisation, and shifting power to our partners in the global South.

Oxfam has a history of speaking out against poverty and inequality – from how apartheid in South Africa was driving poverty, to the vast gap between the world's richest few and the billions facing poverty, and to the deep inequities in Covid vaccine roll-out. We'll keep challenging the global inequalities that fuel poverty, and calling out how the worst effects tend to fall at the feet of those facing gender and racial injustice. But this isn't just about the world around us.

As a product of an inherently unequal society, we'll never achieve our vision of a radically better world until we look inwards, and reflect on our own contribution to the inequalities we wish to address. Not only is it the right thing to do, it will also make us more effective.

There's emerging evidence that organisations who shift decision-making to local actors are better at adapting to change. Essentially, we'll be a stronger organisation, as will the local partner organisations we work with. When those pushing for change have the power to make it happen, we'll see more powerful and longer-lasting solutions to poverty.

**Let's listen, share, learn and reflect on the part we all play – in identifying and calling out the problem, in reflecting on our own behaviour and disrupting the unequal systems around us, and in acting together towards racial justice.**

**We know it won't be easy – it will often be painful, and we won't always get it right. But we're investing ourselves wholeheartedly in this fight for a kinder and radically better world for everyone.**

### **OXFAM UNDERSTANDS...**

**ANTI-RACISM** as more than being non-racist, anti-racism recognises racism has systemic and structural elements, and actively takes steps to combat them.

**FEMINISM** by taking an 'intersectional' view of feminism, knowing that race goes hand-in-hand with other characteristics like gender identity and sex to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege.

**SHIFTING POWER** as a rebalancing of power by moving more money, decision-making, and influence to local communities and organisations around the world who are driving change.

**RACIAL JUSTICE** to be achieved when society is without systems that oppress people – instead it radically redistributes racial power, enabling people of all races to have the same opportunities, regardless of sex, gender, class or physical ability.

# Why does Oxfam need to change?

In recent years, the international development sector has been rightly challenged on a range of vital issues – from not doing enough to prevent the abuse of power, to taking up too much space in local contexts instead of standing in solidarity with local actors, through to how we promote diversity and inclusion in our staff.

For example, an open letter to the international aid sector from Southern organisations stated “if you are serious about ‘shifting power’ then reduce your footprint and brand and use your fundraising machinery to help grassroots organisations create the structures to fundraise for themselves and sustain their work.”

And a recent study of our sector found that among the people of colour who were surveyed, 89% didn’t feel a full commitment to diversity and inclusion from their organisation. Charities like ours should lead by example and truly live our inclusive values.

It’s time for us to rise to these challenges, reflect deeply on our presence and power in the world and in the communities we work with, and think about how we need to transform to achieve our vision for the world.

## WHY FEMINISM AND ANTI-RACISM GO HAND-IN-HAND

Feminism and anti-racism are inherently connected – especially ‘intersectional’ feminism, which recognises that our identities are complex and that we all have unique experiences of both oppression and privilege. It recognises how racism often overlaps with other discrimination such as those based on class, sexuality, gender identity, sex, religion, ability, ethnicity, and migration status. It means upholding the rights of all who are excluded or silenced. If we don’t recognise all intersections of how power and oppression trap people in poverty, including racism, we’ll never achieve our vision of a world without poverty.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW: STRUCTURAL RACISM AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Historical systems such as colonialism and the slave trade have left behind attitudes and behaviours that are deeply engrained in our societies and institutions. Whether we realise it or not, the colonial practice of granting greater power and value to white people has had a profound and lasting impact on our societies, culture and psyches – it affects how we think and behave. The oppressive nature of these historical systems on people of African descent has left behind a particularly widespread and harmful legacy the world-over.

International development is inevitably entangled in this legacy, for example:

- The sector was developed in the global North – so, standards of success are generally based on their cultures and economies.
- Greater importance is placed on knowledge and resources from the global North – meaning expertise and skills in the global South have been systematically devalued.
- Photos and stories have often connected Black people and people of colour with poverty and ignorance, with language that reinforced patronising or disempowering attitudes.
- Campaigning mostly involves people in the global North speaking up for those in the global South instead of with – often rendering those people voiceless and powerless.

As a UK-based organisation born in 1942, we acknowledge that the attitudes and behaviours leftover from the colonial era are as endemic to Oxfam as to other parts of our sector or society – they reinforce racial and gender hierarchies, and cause harm to those who are disempowered by them.

After much reflection, and listening to people we work with around the world, we’ve identified several areas for Oxfam address.

This includes the unacceptable power imbalance between northern-based international organisations and those in the global South who deliver the work. And it includes taking overtly anti-racist and feminist action to disrupt the engrained inequalities and discrimination that causes so much harm within our own organisation.

**It’s abundantly clear to us that if Oxfam GB is to achieve our vision of a kinder and radically better world, we must fundamentally transform how we do things.**

# How does Oxfam need to change?

During 2020-2021, we used a range of methodologies to collect staff views and experiences worldwide (including in the UK), helping us to learn what is needed for Oxfam to shift power and become a truly anti-racist and feminist organisation.

While we listened to staff of all racial backgrounds, the focus was on hearing from Black and people of colour, knowing that they had the most profound lived experience of the injustice we want to address.

We asked for honesty – the result was rich data that reflected individuals' own experiences and perspectives. These conversations provide an invaluable, if often uncomfortable, insight into the challenges we must overcome. They've identified areas that are holding us back and causing harm, including:

- **UNEQUAL PARTNERSHIPS:** Partners from the global North who provide funds have much more power – decision-making, and recognition for their knowledge – than those in the global South who are on the ground delivering the work.
- **QUANTITY OVER QUALITY:** In a drive to demonstrate 'impact' to a society that values numbers, we sometimes emphasise scale over quality of impact in deciding where to work and what to do.
- **AVERSION TO RISK:** Among many things, this is partly due to donor reporting needs, and partly due to a historical view of accountability needing to sit with 'HQ' – and frequently at the expense of the skills, knowledge and esteem of our country office staff and their partners.

- **MISTRUST OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH:** It's felt that 'head office' wants to control all work carried out around the world – implying that staff in the global South aren't trusted to make good decisions.
- **CENTRING OURSELVES:** Our partners have said that we come across as instructing and informing, rather than listening and partnering – this devalues the partners we work with, and can prevent us from being as effective as possible in nurturing a resilient civil society close to the communities in which we work.
- **UNFAIR HUMAN RESOURCE SYSTEMS:** The inherently unequal society we're operating in means people of colour often don't get the progression or management opportunities that match their skills – our human resource systems don't do enough to protect people from those racial inequities playing out within Oxfam.
- **LACK OF AWARENESS:** While many colleagues have shown enthusiasm and allyship for our anti-racist ambitions – some are still unaware of the harms being caused, and many are still learning about structural racism and how they might potentially be contributing to it.
- **A DOMINANT CULTURE:** As a UK-based organisation, there's a culture that staff feel they must adapt to – from how decisions are made and the language we use, to the processes we follow. This culture leaves many, particularly Black and people of colour frustrated and exhausted.
- **WHAT WE SAY VERSUS WHAT WE DO:** We have intentions to get things right, but it's clear that intentions are not enough – in fact, on their own they can be harmful when they come across as empty promises. This strategy must drive us into purposeful action.

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“WHILE MONEY MIGHT TRICKLE DOWN, POWER USUALLY DOES NOT”

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“ASSIMILATION IS EXHAUSTING”

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“WE DEFINE OUR OBJECTIVES AND DON'T INVOLVE OUR PARTNER ORGANISATIONS IN CREATING THE WORK WE WANT TO DELIVER”

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“FROM SAVIOURISM TO SOLIDARITY”

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# What will Oxfam do about it?

Our ability to transform isn't just a question of our internal desire. It's also affected by numerous external factors, from the different laws and regulatory frameworks that we operate under, to the requirements of institutional donors and expectations of supporters. We'll keep analysing what is possible – including by engaging with regulators and donors about how to meet compliance requirements while realising our anti-racist ambitions.

In the meantime, there's plenty that we can take responsibility for right now, and below are the actions we're committing to as part of our ambition to be an anti-racist, feminist and partner-led organisation.

Among many things, the invaluable feedback from our colleagues reinforces that it isn't just about what we do, we must keep thinking carefully about how we do it. So, inspired by the RINGO Project, and as anti-dotes to the harmful tendencies listed above, we promise to:

- **REDEFINE** ourselves to help rebalance power
- **REDESIGN** how we do things in order to address engrained inequalities
- **REMOVE** behaviour that reinforces attitudes that discriminate and harm
- **CO-CREATE** solutions with and for the people for whom this change must be meaningful

## PROGRESS SO FAR...

**This conversation isn't new to Oxfam – we've been developing our work on this issue for years.**

**Progress so far includes:**

- Over recent decades we've evolved how we tell stories – showing people with dignity, respect and agency. More recently, giving communities more ownership over the stories they want to tell, rather than the stories we want to hear.
- We've worked hard to use inclusive and empowering language – investing in insight to understand how certain language makes people feel, and writing an inclusive language guide to help us move away from harmful language like 'beneficiaries' and 'poor people'.
- Over the decades, we've facilitated many local partners and community representatives to be present in global events and debates – for example, in 2006 when Kenyan activist Julius Arile Lomerinyang attended a UN conference in New York to speak out for an arms trade treaty, and in 2019, when we helped our refugee partners to join Oxfam at the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva. Every time we do this, we see how much stronger the impact is when the right voices are heard.
- We've trained a cohort of diversity champions who play an active role in recruitment and promotion decisions – paying special attention to anti-racist and feminist values and behaviours.
- We've created a talent programme that identifies and builds on the skills of staff who are Black or people of colour, and improves access to career progression opportunities.
- More recently, some incredible work has been carried out to hear the experiences of people who work for and with Oxfam so we can truly understand the extent of how much more we need to do. These voices are vital to taking these commitments to the next level so that we can truly transform with focus and determination.
- We've signed the Gender and Development Network's Women of Colour Forum statement on systemic racism, helping us to be held accountable by peers in the sector.
- Our leadership has become more diverse in recent years. In early 2019, about 5% of senior managers were Black or people of colour, rising to 13% by early 2022.

# To rebalance power, we'll redefine...

## ...OUR LEADERSHIP BY:

- Harnessing the talent and experience that diversity can bring to our organisation, including our target that the proportion of women and people of colour in our leadership is at least the same as our wider staff population.
- Promoting diverse leadership through our talent coaching programme for Black and people of colour, and by partnering with others who can share their expertise and insights.
- Ensuring buy-in and ownership, particularly focusing on the biggest opportunities for change.
- Committing to an ongoing process of learning about racial justice, such as our anti-racism learning programme for senior leaders.

## ...OUR BEHAVIOUR BY:

- Developing new approaches that put the people and communities we work with at their heart, and challenging others we work with to do the same.
- Finding new ways to fulfil our risk and compliance responsibilities while also delivering on our ambitions to shift power and resources to the South.
- Being aware of Oxfam GB's power and influence, and modelling progressive ways of shifting power in relationship to others.
- Leading by example on safeguarding so that we rebalance power and meet the needs of those who face racial and gender discrimination.

## ...OXFAM'S IDENTITY BY:

- Understanding the influence of our past on who we are, what we do and how we behave – using that knowledge to understand and change how inequalities play-out within Oxfam.
- Keeping shifting power, anti-racism and feminism at the centre of how we talk about ourselves and our work – so that our radical ambitions are unequivocally part of the Oxfam story.

“COMMITTING  
TO AN ONGOING  
PROCESS OF  
LEARNING ABOUT  
RACIAL JUSTICE”



# To address inequalities, we'll redesign...

## ...ACCOUNTABILITY BY:

- Ensuring our reporting processes support and protect those who face racial and gender discrimination.
- Understanding why previous action plans may have failed, owning our mistakes and using this as an opportunity for learning.

## ...OUR PARTNERSHIPS BY:

- Re-calibrating the relationship between Oxfam GB and the rest of our confederation so that we shift power - money, decision-making, influence - to Southern teams and their partners.
- Reviewing our procurement policies to use our influence to promote racial and gender diversity in the staff and leadership of our suppliers.

## ...OUR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES BY:

- Reviewing our policies to ensure that they're purposefully anti-racist and feminist, so that minority and marginalised staff are supported and protected.
- Ensuring our recruitment process is truly inclusive by placing job adverts to target and draw on talent from under-represented groups.
- Updating and consolidating our Oxfam GB policies so that they meet our regulatory and donor expectations, but are also appropriate for the diverse contexts in which we support work.

## ...OUR INVESTMENT FOR CHANGE BY:

- Understanding that equality, especially racial justice, is a long-term investment that requires people, money and time to create lasting systems change, and that these requirements are reflected in budget and planning processes.
- Recognising the important work our staff networks do and allocating resources to support them.
- Actively shifting relevant resources and staff roles to the global South to promote a more globally balanced leadership of our confederation.

## ...OUR CULTURE OF BELONGING BY:

- Accepting discomfort as part of being anti-racist, knowing that we need to break things down in order to build back up.
- Celebrating lived experience as a valuable form of knowledge and expertise that helps Oxfam to fulfil its purpose of ending poverty.
- Making sure everyone within Oxfam GB is encouraged and supported to learn about our intersectional approach to feminism.

“UNDERSTANDING  
THAT EQUALITY,  
ESPECIALLY  
RACIAL JUSTICE,  
IS A **LONG-TERM  
INVESTMENT**”

# To challenge behaviour that discriminates and harms, we'll remove...

## ...ATTITUDES THAT ARE BARRIERS TO UNDERSTANDING BY:

- Enabling courageous conversations internally and working in solidarity with people who want to achieve our radical ambitions alongside us.
- Aiming to bring external stakeholders along with us so we can all be part of the transformation together.

## ... SHORT-TERM, PROJECTISED APPROACHES BY:

- Moving away from dominant cultures, behaviours and systems that compel organisations to adhere to artificially short and projectised time-frames.
- Being conscious of the strains that reporting requirements and time frames place on the people and partners we work with, and doing our best to reduce them.

## ...ATTITUDES BASED ON WHITE SAVIOURISM BY:

- Acknowledging how we've contributed to this in the past at times through the portrayal of Oxfam staff and donors as 'saviours'.
- Respecting and empowering those we work with in all communications, programmes and internal culture.
- Ensuring that we stand with, and not above, others creating change by providing resources and knowledge where necessary.

## ...OUR OUTDATED POLICIES BY:

- Assessing which ones are no longer helpful, to ensure we only have policies that help us honour our commitments to shifting power, and to being an anti-racist and feminist organisation.

“WORKING IN  
**SOLIDARITY** WITH  
PEOPLE WHO WANT  
TO ACHIEVE OUR  
RADICAL AMBITIONS  
ALONGSIDE US”

# With and for the people for whom this change must be meaningful, we'll co-create...

## ...AN ANALYSIS OF SHIFTING POWER BY:

- Understanding the discomfort we need to push past, and what we need to let go of and change in order to do this.
- What losing power means for Oxfam, and ultimately what we and the world will gain as a result.

## ...OUR UNDERSTANDING OF STRUCTURAL RACISM BY:

- Being honest about how this shows up within Oxfam and how staff are affected by this.
- Recognising the unequal power dynamic between the UK and the countries we work in.

## ...A SPACE OF OPENNESS AND HONESTY BY:

- Ensuring all staff feel supported and protected when reporting harm, especially those who have traditionally feared coming forward.
- Encouraging staff to reflect on their own privilege and supporting them to face the discomfort needed to do so.

## ...A SPACE OF LEARNING AND GROWTH BY:

- Recognising that this paper and action plan are just a start.
- Understanding that this is a long-term commitment that needs continuous focus and reflection, and openness about what is and isn't working.
- Working to ensure that racial and gender justice, and shifting power must be built into the fabric of Oxfam's future.

“WORKING TO ENSURE THAT RACIAL AND GENDER JUSTICE, AND SHIFTING POWER MUST BE BUILT INTO THE FABRIC OF OXFAM'S FUTURE.”

# Next steps

**Now it's time for us to turn those commitments into an action plan. Working with key people in each division, and centred around the lived experiences of people who work with and for Oxfam, we'll develop tangible and measurable actions that enable us to deliver on these commitments.**

This action plan is being purposefully developed to coincide with budget and objective planning cycles so it can be collectively owned and practically delivered by all divisions. This also enables us to identify the resources needed to deliver it – money, time, energy, discomfort.

The action plan will also highlight the benefit each action will bring to Oxfam's cause, and for the people who work with and for us – recognising that despite the difficult journey, the result will be worth it and ultimately uplift everyone.

We hope that by doing all this, we can show others in the sector how shifting power and resources can lead us to a more effective aid system.

## **WHAT WILL A TRANSFORMED OXFAM LOOK LIKE?**

We'll know we've got there when our staff, communities and partners we work with – those with lived experience of racism and other form of inequality and discrimination – tell us we've succeeded.

We won't stop this transformation until all staff feel included, and partners and communities are truly driving the change we want to see in the world. We must keep listening and learning from their experiences.

## **WE WILL:**

### **Be accountable for living our values...**

Through an 'Accountability and Values Forum', we'll look at data that shows our progress on shifting underlying cultural behaviour and assumptions. This forum has been set up meaningfully to include the voices of staff, partners and volunteers – through this we can hold ourselves accountable to the real lived experience of staff.

### **Be held to account by others...**

We'll develop ways for our country teams, local partners, and the wider sector to hold us to account for our commitments. With a close eye on upholding our values, it will reflect our increasing understanding of how power and privilege plays out in Oxfam, and will build on the current misconduct feedback process. As part of our accountability to others in our sector, we'll develop this in solidarity with various initiatives to decolonise aid, including Pledge for Change and Charter for Change. And in doing all this we'll make effective use of the funds entrusted to us, ensuring we're still held to account by our donors for how their money is used, while honouring the commitments we've made to our teams and partners in the global South.

### **Hold ourselves to account...**

We'll develop, deliver and measure our work in different ways, focused on rebalancing power and changing systems that entrench systemic racism. Traditional ways of evaluating our work are narrow and often exacerbate power imbalances. We acknowledge the power and the role of evaluators, and we'll develop a Learning and Accountability Framework that is people-focused, collaborative, and that reflects how our approach truly contributes to change. This will, in turn, help us be accountable to our donors for how their funds are spent.

**As an organisation made up of individuals, each with our own experiences of oppression and privilege, we must all hold ourselves and each other to account for our own power, behaviour, learning, understanding and contribution. Together, we can transform Oxfam – and, ultimately, contribute to a kinder and radically better world.**



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- 1 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/an-open-letter-to-international-ngos-who-are-looking-to-localise-their-operations/>
- 2 <https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/racism-power-and-truth>
- 3 <https://rightscolab.org/ringo/>