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Race, Racialization and Coloniality in the Humanitarian Aid Sector

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With the murder by suffocation of George Floyd at the hands of a Minnesota police officer in the US in July 2020, a wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests swept the world, bringing decades-long activist calls to 'decolonise' our social, political and economic systems into the mainstream. Echoes of this call have now penetrated the world of humanitarian action, a sector that Rutazibwa (2021:264; emphasis in original) opines maintains 'a systemic disregard for *certain* lives' which, she argues, 'continues to be the organising principle of the postcolonial world order'. Claims of 'expediency' and 'urgency' in response to crisis has meant a wilful ignorance of accusations of racism, sexism and violence¹ for many years that, in light of BLM, could no longer be ignored. The organisations comprising the aid and humanitarian complex found themselves increasingly entangled in accusations of violence, racism and prejudice and, in the UK, formed the backdrop of a Parliamentary sub-inquiry on 'Racism in the Aid Sector' undertaken in 2021-22 as part of a larger government inquiry into the 'Philosophy and Culture of Aid'.² This chapter will interrogate the ways humanitarian aid and associated action reproduce socially constructed notions of race, recasting humanitarianism anew from what Daley (2021: 253) argues are 'conventional understandings which associate it with benevolence, compassion and humanity'.

In this chapter I will elaborate on two key observations inspired by my own positionality both as a former development practitioner and a PoC academic/activist based in the UK/Global North, and both are inflected through the lenses of 'impartiality and neutrality'. The first is that a manufactured distinction tends to be made in both discourse and practice between the delivery of humanitarian aid, which is about the immediacy of perceived need as a result of acute crisis, and longer term (political) change processes that we might link to broader 'development' goals. The concern this raises is that questions of inequalities – whether in relation to race, class or gender – may be dismissed as beyond the remit of the humanitarian worker and/or agency. The second concern, following directly from the first, is that given the urgency of the crisis context, principles of 'neutrality' and/or 'impartiality' on the part of the humanitarian aid worker become central to the delivery of this form of aid. This (artificial) separation of designated 'humanitarian' action spaces from the broader social, political and economic context within which humanitarian aid is delivered raises questions about both the nature of this action but also who gets to be considered a 'neutral' actor in this space. The key

¹ In the last decade many allegations have emerged of sexual abuse and racism by UN and other peacekeeping forces the world over, please see [Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN Peacekeepers: Towards a Hybrid Sol \(routledge.com\)](https://www.routledge.com/The-New-Humanitarian/EXCLUSIVE-Alleged-sex-abuse-by-aid-workers-unchecked-for-years-in-UN-run-South-Sudan-camp/UN-Peacekeeping-has-a-Sexual-Abuse-Problem/Human-Rights-Watch/hrw.org/Médecins-Sans-Frontières-is-institutionally-racist-say-1000-insiders/Humanitarian-response/The-Guardian); [The New Humanitarian | EXCLUSIVE: Alleged sex abuse by aid workers unchecked for years in UN-run South Sudan camp](https://www.routledge.com/The-New-Humanitarian/EXCLUSIVE-Alleged-sex-abuse-by-aid-workers-unchecked-for-years-in-UN-run-South-Sudan-camp/UN-Peacekeeping-has-a-Sexual-Abuse-Problem/Human-Rights-Watch/hrw.org); [UN Peacekeeping has a Sexual Abuse Problem | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](https://www.routledge.com/The-New-Humanitarian/EXCLUSIVE-Alleged-sex-abuse-by-aid-workers-unchecked-for-years-in-UN-run-South-Sudan-camp/UN-Peacekeeping-has-a-Sexual-Abuse-Problem/Human-Rights-Watch/hrw.org); [Médecins Sans Frontières is 'institutionally racist', say 1,000 insiders | Humanitarian response | The Guardian](https://www.routledge.com/The-New-Humanitarian/EXCLUSIVE-Alleged-sex-abuse-by-aid-workers-unchecked-for-years-in-UN-run-South-Sudan-camp/UN-Peacekeeping-has-a-Sexual-Abuse-Problem/Human-Rights-Watch/hrw.org) amongst many other books and reports.

² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmintdev/150/report.html>

concern here is that perceptions of humanitarianism as politically neutral forms of intervention in crisis operate in context-free ways that can exacerbate inequalities and ultimately cause more harm than good. Moreover, that humanitarian actors may be understood as impartial, neutral and 'outside the fray' is only possible on the presumption of a 'White saviour' as the default humanitarian actor; that is, only people who would be raced as 'White' could be seen to be acting outside of political, social or economic subjectivities, with a unique capacity to deliver aid in a crisis without 'fear or favour'. Drawing on the work of Mills (1997) amongst others, this chapter will argue that the Global North has both centred and invisibilised (aspirational) whiteness as integral to the racial hierarchies prevalent in 'aid' chains and humanitarian work. The analysis will then move on to consider how race operates as a variable of (disempowering) subjectivity, providing some contemporary insights into the implications for intra- and inter-organisational dynamics as well as the raced dynamics that underpin judgments about the relative worthiness of some victims over others in moments of crisis, undermining the idea that humanitarianism is, or could/should be, impartial or neutral.

Neutrality, impartiality and humanitarian action as distinct from 'development' ...

Almost 20 years ago I attended a meeting hosted by a donor agency in my capacity as a development practitioner. Many organisations had been invited to discuss concerns around gender and conflict, and not surprisingly humanitarian action was a central consideration, including how equity and inclusion are important for effective humanitarian action. The Advisor hosting the meeting expressed shock when many of us pointed out that humanitarianism and development are in fact two sides of the same coin; effective humanitarian action MUST be linked to broader development goals, that these are not separate but rather overlapping spheres, and should be shaped by similar considerations. Whilst a positive discussion was had on the day, the immediacy of crisis means that this is nonetheless a recommendation that continues to go unheeded.

The reasoning in much of the literature that supports this distinction, and which animates the critical reflection in this chapter, is the presumption that humanitarian action is contingent on both *neutrality and impartiality*, which Hammond (2015: 87) defines as follows:

Neutrality is defined in its most basic sense as a refusal to take sides in a conflict, while impartiality involves the giving of assistance with regard only to the individual's need and without any consideration of their position vis-à-vis the conflict.

Historically, she tells us, this has tended to be deployment to ensure the 'humane treatment of injured combatants' (ibid: 89), so very much a medical focus and in relation in particular to the outbreak of conflict.

Humanitarian action in this conceptualisation is 'both a set of life-saving interventions and an underlying ethos for action, in which politically neutral – but empathic and compassionate –

individuals risk their own lives to save the lives of distant others in distress' (Benton, 2016: 189), and separated from longer-term 'development' goals.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, Lie (2020: 2) notes that an outcome of this meeting was a belief in the need to bring 'together humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts, into what became known as the triple nexus'. As Hammond (2015) herself notes, this divide with 'development' has indeed come unstuck. What is considered 'humanitarian' has widened considerably, where humanitarian organisations have increasingly stretched their mandates beyond battlefields and where interventions are lasting longer than immediate life-saving action. The concern, Lie (2020: 3) contends, is that this 'nexus' has the effect of widening the 'scope' of humanitarian action, 'which causes a depletion of its principles and space' and thus moving beyond its 'apolitical fundamentals'. That crisis – pandemics, natural disasters – require timely responses to protect or save human life is not really at issue here, since clearly this imperative is likely to be the most urgent one. Rather, as Benton (2016: 190) notes, these actions 'rely on a vague notion of the human – humanity devoid of social markers like race, class or gender'. The idea that humanitarian action might be considered neutral or 'apolitical' – and thus intrinsically separate in some way from 'development' – is undermined where the need for humanitarian intervention is devoid of contextualisation regarding the 'relationships preceding the humanitarian encounter – particularly those that condition the necessity for humanitarian relief in the first place' (Benton, 2016: 190). Crisis may emerge anywhere; what conditions the capacity to respond is likely to be directly aligned with how those contexts have historically been understood in relation to 'development'.

Here it is thus worth reflecting briefly on why action within this 'nexus' might be desirable, given the shared challenges that emerge from the overlaps in the nexus that result from the professionalisation of both people and practice in humanitarian action and development. Hierarchies abound, where intersectional differences – or the co-constituted experiences of embodied identities including race, class and gender³ – overlap with 'who can afford the acquisition of status symbols of institutional education and mobile, international working experience' (Junru, 2022: 4, citing James, 2016; see also Narayanaswamy, 2017; Roth, 2015). We might also point to the question of 'neutrality', where 'development' is pitched as a technical rather than political intervention, in which similarly project-based, shortened timescales are the norm. Ferguson's (1994) 'anti-politics machine' epitomises this tendency, where development practice has historically, and continues to, rely on 'project' based funding with identifiable 'targets' and 'deliverables' on timescales that are longer than crisis response, but still measured in short bursts of 3-5 years. The longer-term challenges of 'development' are interpreted as the 'result of a historical stage and a fundamentally technical problem (lack of knowledge, education, infrastructure or technology) to be solved by nonpolitical interventions' (Ziai, 2015: 151). In short, we need just to dig a well or build a school, the argument goes, and 'development' will follow.

³ Please see Crenshaw, 1989; GADN, 2017 in relation to development.

Increasingly, and particularly in light of the most recent amplification of racism emerging from the BLM movement(s), objectives such as equality are part of what development researchers and practitioners are required to address. Yet project-based delivered is not really suitable for the sorts of longer-term objectives that are central to the targets and associated competencies required to be awarded funding, including goals like 'gender equality and social inclusion (GESI)', which may then include objectives to tackle racism and racial inequality (see Narayanaswamy, 2017; Petras, 1999; Tvedt, 1998). In short, tackling the power structures that underpin all types of inequality, including racial inequality (and the associated racisms that might manifest as a result of these inequalities) takes time. Measuring 'progress' in goals such as the SDGs, for instance, is a real challenge as this is so often context-specific but very often deeply personal, where change, if it happens at all, may be intangible and/or immeasurable (see Hayman et al, 2016). This approach also underestimates the way institutional/organisational dynamics are themselves not neutral but both entrench and amplify inequalities, and where race may be considered 'constitutive of organizational foundations' (Ray, 2019: 26). Given all of these intersecting dynamics, it is clear that there is no one 'intervention' or 'pathway' that will guarantee equality, particularly as the system we live in is also historically contingent and in which hierarchies of race, class and gender are so deeply embedded. Let's look now specifically at the question of race and how its conceptualisation might affect notions of 'neutrality' in humanitarian action.

Race, humanitarianism and neutrality

The issue of race and how it interacts with notions of neutrality has personal significance. I come to the space of development and humanitarian action, and the relevance of race and racialised hierarchies, after starting my career at the turn of the 21st century as so many do through voluntourism, which in my case consisted of working on 'women's empowerment' at a women's rights NGO in Central America. It was an experience that conferred both privilege and marginality on the basis of race, even once in the very same encounter. As a cis woman born and raised as 'minoritised' in the Global North, my passport bestowed unimaginable privilege, and my skin colour predictable exclusion. These opposing dynamics collided one night outside a dance club, where I had alighted with friends and one to which I had already been a few times. The bouncer that evening started letting my friends in but stopped me and waved me away. We managed to ascertain that he thought I was '*indigena*', that is, an 'indigenous' person, racializing me as inferior owing to my darker skin, and thus not worthy to enter a club, particularly one that welcomed, indeed traded on, its reputation as an entertainment destination favoured by white foreigners. The funny thing was, I managed to convince the bouncer I am Canadian, and upon hearing my accent, changed his mind and let me in. This experience demonstrated forcefully the centrality of race to who gets to be considered 'developing' or 'developed', but also the blurriness of the boundaries. For the purposes of this chapter, that blurriness raises questions about notions of 'neutrality' when it comes to race, because this experience taught me that it is not possible to be considered 'neutral' or 'above the fray' in a racialised, or darker-skinned body.

Whilst principles of neutrality and impartiality continue to be talked about as the cornerstones of humanitarian aid, this scholarship features extensive critiques and problematisation of both in humanitarian theory and practice. Hammond (2015) provides a helpful summary, noting in particular that how humanitarian actors are meant to interpret and deliver on them becomes fraught in practice. She recognises that a range of factors that might hinder the capacity to uphold these positions include: the politics of the conflict itself; the safety of those delivering support; and the perception of politicisation as humanitarian aid itself extends into an ever wider range of activities including state building as well as longer term efforts to address the root causes of conflict (Hammond, 2015). As noted above, there are inevitably overlaps with that work we might in fact label 'development'.

Yet what these explanations tend to overlook is an interrogation of the terminologies themselves. The ways in which racial hierarchies exist within the humanitarian system is the subject of an extensive literature in which the starting point is what Pallister-Wilkins (2021: 98) argues is the fact that 'humanitarianism is animated and made possible by white supremacy', wherein the interactions between 'providers and recipients of aid' are 'structured by hierarchies of privilege, race among them' (Benton, 2016: 190). The construction of race, underpinned by the ideology of white supremacy, has endured for more than 400 years and continues to inform the distribution of power and wealth, determine class and citizenship status and impact life outcomes for everyone in society (see Rutazibwa, 2021).

Building on an understanding of these dynamics as deriving substantially from diverse European colonial encounters, for the purposes of this chapter we can identify two important and contiguous issues. The first is the hierarchies of racism in the spaces of both humanitarian action but also development highlight challenges that people of colour (PoC) face, with a concern around the persistence of anti-blackness (see Junru, 2022; Tegbaru, 2020) and 'the idea that certain religions promote tendencies toward violence and terrorism' (Purkayastha, 2012: 61), with a particular emphasis on Islamophobia (see Aloudat and Khan, 2021; Kibria et al., 2021). No less important is exploration of the hierarchies of race that underpin white supremacy that simultaneously places whiteness at the top whilst invisibilising it as the norm. Pallister-Wilkins (2021), drawing on the work of Du Bois (1920) and 'whiteness', alongside interrogations of 'universalist understandings of the "human"' from Wynter (1996), challenges the idea that it may ever be possible to 'decolonise' humanitarianism.

Given the centrality of 'neutrality' to the analysis in this chapter, its worth understanding the importance of racial hierarchies that both place whiteness at the top whilst simultaneously invisibilising its systemic effects:

Ironically, the most important political system of recent global history – the system of domination by which white people have historically ruled over and, in certain important ways, continue to rule over non-white people – is not seen as a political system at all. It is just taken for granted; it is the background against which other

systems, which we are to see as political, are highlighted ... What is needed, in other words, is a recognition that racism (or, as I will argue, global white supremacy) is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties (Mills, 1997: 1-3).

It is absolutely crucial to understand how racism affects darker-skinned people, and people raced as Black especially, how white supremacy marginalises the views, agency and knowledge(s) of people deemed historically inferior. Yet what is often left out of these accounts is how colonialism, and its attendant legacies, are also about white people, about 'whiteness' as a social construction, about race hierarchies that put whiteness at the top. The privilege that 'whiteness' confers is largely invisible, where race is talked about in terms of categories like BAME in the UK or Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) in the US. In short, only 'darker' skinned people are 'raced'. Does this mean that all white people are privileged? Of course not. All this means is that whatever challenges you may face in life, if you are white, or indeed 'lighter' skinned, then your skin colour is less likely to operate as an additional barrier. But by invisibilising whiteness, it's the norm, the default, and this has consequences for 'othered' bodies not just in the West.

Centring whiteness allows us to identify the challenges of humanitarian 'neutrality' that continue to permeate how crisis response is understood. Drawing on critical IR scholars including Rutazibwa (2016) and Sabaratnam (2013), Pallister-Wilkins (2022: 99) rightly points to the 'obfuscation' that occurs when we talk about humanitarianism as 'Eurocentric', where 'humanitarianism's liberal universalizing claims have not been offset by attempts to challenge Eurocentrism within the sector through localization agendas, participatory programming and attempts to diversify personnel'. Even here, Slim (2020) admits a reluctance by many actors in the sector even to 'localise', with a plea that

... we members of the white humanitarian elite should now be more direct and speak about a racist gaze that still exists in humanitarian action and the system of white privilege that governs Western humanitarian resources.

In echoes of participation as the 'new tyranny' in development discourse and practice (see Kothari and Cooke, 2001), there is a growing concern that the language of anti-racism and decolonisation is itself being 'colonised'.⁴

The material effects of this hierarchy are that neutrality only functions in and through 'whiteness', wherein we derive 'white saviour' or 'white knight' tropes that persist in humanitarian action, with the more dramatic, celebrity versions of this trope as the most visible (Budabin and Richey, 2021). Yet White Saviour narratives also persist in our everyday practice because of racist tropes that became of our collective psyche laid down in the colonial

⁴ See www.devex.com/news/sponsored/opinion-beyond-the-buzz-words-dei-and-decolonizing-global-health-104586

era. The idea that Black and brown bodies are incapable of ‘culture’, ‘civilisation’, and ‘lack of self-control’ were all part of the science of eugenics that flourished as part justification for Empire.⁵ Shevchenko and Fox (2008: 117), in their critique of Medecin San Frontieres (MSF), argue that the

... universalistic convictions on which MSF is founded underlie a tendency throughout the organization to suppose that playing down cultural differences, overlooking them and, if possible, overcoming or dispelling them, constitute desirable modes of surmounting cultural “borders” ... The extent to which the “non-ideological ideology” of MSF that expatriates bring with them has been influenced by Western European history and values is generally not acknowledged.

The use of terms such as ‘national’ versus ‘expat’ undermines, as they note, commitments to ‘universalism’, and instead represent ‘disparities ... in the statuses, roles, opportunities, and recognition granted to national, as compared with expatriate personnel’ (ibid: 115). It is a dynamic that elevates the views and values of ‘expats’ over ‘nationals’, entrenching hierarchies that are also deeply racialised, with implications for who or what is perceived as ‘neutral’ or ‘impartial’.

The reality of ‘neutrality and impartiality’ in humanitarian action

In preparation for writing this chapter, I watched a number of webinars that took place between 2020 and 2022 attempting to grapple with the question of anti-racism, decolonisation and moving away from Eurocentric framings of both development and humanitarian action. One intervention that struck me as emblematic of the challenge of neutrality when interrogating race and racism in the humanitarian space was shared in an event hosted by the Overseas Development Institute’s (ODI) Humanitarian Policy Group entitled ‘Beyond neutrality: alternative forms of humanitarian action’ on 1 December 2022. Farouq Habib, Deputy GM for External Affairs, The White Helmets (aka Syria Civil Defence), a humanitarian volunteer organisation made up of Syrians, shared his experience of the relationship between humanitarian intervention and the presumption of ‘neutrality’:

‘I don’t want to say that neutrality is a luxury for us because we ... have disagreements about the definition and interpretation of neutrality itself ... so for example when the perpetrator of the violation or the war crime is an Islamist group and we document that violation, we report it, we speak about it, no one questions our neutrality. That’s normal, no one talks about it. But if the perpetrator is the US or Russia or the government and we report it or we talk

⁵ ‘Negroes’ as incapable of ‘development’ or ‘culture’ are racist tropes that persist to this day, handed down by Eugenicists including Galton, please see for example <https://galton.org/letters/africa-for-chinese/AfricaForTheChinese.htm>; see also the discussion in Narayanaswamy et al., 2021.

about it, at that time we start receiving these questions and criticisms ‘oh no, you are not neutral, you shouldn’t take a side or talk about them’. So that’s yes frustrating for people on the ground ...⁶

Habib’s reflections reinforce racialised hierarchies in humanitarian spaces. Where religious (read ‘barbaric’) extremism is reported by ‘local’ groups, this not only fits into dominant geo-political perceptions of civilisation versus barbarism (see Sabir, 2022 for an analysis of Islamophobia and the War on Terror), but people raced as brown/black interlocutors are only understood as knowledgeable about the ‘local’. Habib’s experience echoes that of many others in spaces of both humanitarianism and development where black and brown ‘others’, especially in the so-called Global South, should not attempt to rise above their ‘local’ station. We can hear echoes, for instance, of the observations of the Sangtin writers (2006), a group of seven working class/lower caste women who were recruited to support women’s empowerment efforts by a large NGO in North India. These women argue that they were not allowed to have a view about issues like ‘globalisation’ or to connect their own impoverishment with the wider ‘marginalization and disempowerment of poor women’ (ibid: 143), but could only speak to ‘local’ issues for women in their community. Informants in Junru’s (2022: 9) study also downplay their own knowledge but do so voluntarily and in favour of Western-educated White Europeans, where

[t]heir “localness”, characterized by their black, brown, and non-white skins, can be the ultimate determinants to local experts’ professionalism being recognized and respected, as their racial profiles have long been formed in strong association with certain origins of under-development.

In the context of humanitarian action in our present, taken together what all of this implies is that only white people can be considered neutral. Humanitarian actors who may be racialised or minoritized due to distinguishing characteristics including being darker-skinned will not be understood to be operating outside of prevailing norms on one or the other side of conflict, or beyond the ‘local’. In other words, if you are raced as Brown or Black, you are by definition not considered to be neutral, but to have a subject position that shares an affinity with other oppressed groups who are presumed to look similar to you, many of whom also tend to be disproportionately at the sharp end of the vast majority of crises that require urgent humanitarian intervention. And this subjectivity shapes what you are and are not able to speak about, which is likely to be limited to the ‘local’ rather than to the broader politics of a given context.

What are the implications of race hierarchies in humanitarian spaces? Some of the measures designed to respond to concerns around racism and Eurocentrism, as noted by Pallister-Wilkins, have been around localisation, increased participation or diversifying personnel. It is of course true that power imbalances have raced, gendered and other intersectional

⁶ <https://odi.org/en/events/beyond-neutrality-alternative-forms-of-humanitarian-action/>

dimensions that have historically narrowed who is seen as a 'leader' in the context of both humanitarian action and development. The question is: whose vision is permissible and who is 'allowed' to be a leader on the basis of that vision? There is a risk of simply reproducing existing power imbalances, except with leaders who are based in the Global South who in reality have limited agency because of existing funding structures. There may be efforts to increase 'participation' but that continue to be de-linked from decision-making structures. Or there may be efforts to 'diversify' personnel, hiring people who 'look' visibly different (read: darker-skinned) i.e., ticking diversity 'boxes' against a norm of 'whiteness'. The reason we are likely to end up with these shallow approaches to anti-racism and/or decolonisation, with superficial nods to 'localisation' or 'participation' alongside nods to representation, where ticking a 'diversity' box is used as a proxy for rebalancing power in the aid sector, is that the capacity to operate in ways that meet the requirements of most international agencies is reserved for those people who share certain professional characteristics, including being able to speak English and holding an advanced degree from a recognised (preferably Western) Higher Education institution (Junru, 2019; Narayanaswamy, 2017; Roth, 2015). So the question of whose vision counts and 'who leads' as a result will depend on whether we can also diversify the ideas that in turn inform who is 'allowed' to lead and/or be seen as a possible leader, and whether the notion of capacity can be broadened to include a wider array of *competencies* and/or characteristics that would, in turn, open up the possibilities for more diverse ideas and ultimately people to aspire to leadership roles in the humanitarian sector.

Racism as a structural barrier to the 'neutral and impartial' delivery of humanitarian aid

The most immediately obvious way in which hierarchies shaped by gender and race manifest in humanitarian aid is through the revelations over the past decade of racism and gendered violence wrought UN and NGO peacekeepers in places like South Sudan and Haiti which, as noted above, has led to widespread condemnation and a UK parliamentary inquiry on the Philosophy and Culture of Aid in 2021. In this final section, however, the analysis will reflect on how this racialisation also works in reverse i.e. not all those who are in need of humanitarian aid will receive the same support, even within the response to the same crisis.

Racism shapes who is and is not considered to be worthy of humanitarian intervention in the first place. A focus on Europe's border regime provides us with a comprehensive example of the operation of structural racism in humanitarian practice. With continued conflict on the edges of Europe in Ukraine, as well as slightly further afield in both Syria and Yemen, the ceding of power in Afghanistan to the Taliban in 2021, and in February 2023 a 7.8 magnitude earthquake destroying large regions of Syria and Turkey, the need for people to move for safety, sanctuary and to access basic needs continues to be urgent. Given the proximity of these emergencies to the European Union's borders, the question of whether and how to support these different populations has a particular urgency.

Yet the communique from the European Council's one-day summit in Brussels on 9 February 2023⁷ paints a very clear picture of who and is not considered worthy of EU support. This communique summarises the range of support offered by the EU to Ukraine after Russia's invasion in February 2022. The speed of the response was laudable and the support offered to Ukraine exceptional; as the communique emphasises, Russian sanctions, including limits to purchasing Russian fuels and the freezing of Russian assets, have already been undertaken, whilst the EU and its members states have provided 'at least €67 billion in assistance to Ukraine and its people'.

We can compare this to language further on in the same communique around migration, and stated commitments to 'swift actions to ensure effective returns, using all relevant EU policies and instruments, including *diplomacy, development, trade and visas*, and legal migration' (my emphasis). This is all to 'ensure effective control of its [the EU's] external land and sea borders'. With reference to the arrival of around 1 million refugees to the EU in 2015, displaced primarily, though not exclusively by conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia, Almustafa (2021: 1065) reframes the idea of the 'European migration crisis' as instead a 'crisis of protection'. Describing the EU's border regime as 'orientalist' in its approach, he argues that 'governments' fail to see refugees as real individuals who deserve to be treated as equal as other people in the Global North' (ibid: 1077). As noted above, there are many conflicts within the orbit of the EU's borders, but the needs of people racialised as non-European (brown/black and predominantly Muslim) are not perceived as the same as those of Ukrainians.

Yet even WITHIN the Ukraine conflict itself we can also observe the failure of 'neutrality and impartiality' to guide the humanitarian response within the country, where even evacuations were subject to racialised hierarchies. As the Russian invasion bombarded major Ukrainian cities, evidence began emerging in March 2022, one month after the invasion began, that people racialised as non-European, that is, non-white, were held back from boarding trains and buses, with some being held at the Ukrainian border with Poland without any support.⁸ For those people who managed to flee Ukraine and escape to countries including Germany, many of whom were students from countries like Nigeria and India, they have not been able to access support available to Ukrainian citizens fleeing that same conflict.⁹ The example of the evacuation of Ukraine demonstrates that a hierarchy of racism clearly persists in how humanitarian aid is delivered, mirroring the concerns raised by Almustafa of who is and is not worthy of protection within and just outside the EU's borders, and undermining what many continue to insist are core dual principles of 'neutrality and impartiality'.

Conclusion: moving beyond notions of 'neutrality and impartiality'

⁷ [Special European Council - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europa.eu/press-room/en/infographic/eu-response-to-russian-invasion-of-ukraine)

⁸ [Indian and African students fleeing Ukraine say they face racism at border | CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/15/ukraine-racism-at-border/index.html); [Europe's official, media handling of Ukrainian crisis exposes deep-rooted, racist policy against non-Europeans \[EN/AR\] - Ukraine | ReliefWeb](https://www.reliefweb.org/en/ukraine-crisis-exposes-deep-rooted-racist-policy-against-non-europeans)

⁹ [Africans fleeing Ukraine accuse Germany of double standards – DW – 05/23/2022](https://www.dw.com/en/africans-fleeing-ukraine-accuse-germany-of-double-standards/a-61444444)

What this analysis has made clear is that humanitarianism and crisis response as key elements of 'aid' delivery are not, nor can ever be, neutral or impartial. Racism, and its colonial, orientalist underpinnings are not historical artefacts but very much a part of the contemporary fabric of determining who is and is not worthy of safety and sanctuary amidst conflict and natural disasters. Part of the concern that this analysis has revealed is the artificial divide created between 'humanitarian' intervention and the wider commitment upheld in instruments like the SDGs to 'development', a boundary that is increasingly blurred as the world juggles ever more complex, intertwined and relentless health, conflict and climate crises without end. Anti-racist humanitarian practice demands more than merely assuming that a position of 'neutrality' or 'impartiality' or the ticking of 'diversity' boxes that changes the skin tone of senior personnel will mitigate against structural racism. Instead what we must demand is no less than global institutional reform that starts with the recognition of shared colonial pasts that embedded and proliferated racialised hierarchies that need to be continually challenged and dismantled if we are to have a humanitarian aid architecture able to credibly and fairly respond to the needs of all people in crisis.

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