

CAFOD anti-racism progress

Following a series of anti-racism seminars for CEOs hosted by Bond and the subsequent formation of the Bond CEO Anti-Racism Working group, we asked three CEOs to take us through their progress on anti-racism within their organisation.

In the second in our series, we hear from Christine Allen, CEO of CAFOD, on their culture.

About you: This work is personal – about the individual and the organisation

1. What made you engage in this work?

As someone who has been working for peace and justice issues for most of my life, addressing discrimination has always been a natural thing.

Although we are all equal and sacred in the eyes of God, I know that inequality and injustice is inherent in the structures of our society and wider world. I come from a very white, working-class background and, as a woman, even in international development I have often been the “unusual” one in the room. I have experienced plenty of discrimination myself, so it’s about solidarity.

Theme: Anti-racism and organisational culture

2. How would you describe the culture at CAFOD before you began this work?

It was – and still is – a polite culture of people who are very nice and very committed. In the UK, it was very white – especially at management level. There was an internal support group, they called it a BAME group, and hearing from colleagues in my own organisation who had experienced discrimination and felt excluded at work was a shock. This realisation came from engaging with that group of people of colour within CAFOD not long after I joined in 2019. I acknowledged my own discomfort and, to some degree, defensiveness, and we set about trying to create a “Safe and Inclusive working culture”.

It wasn’t easy and we were addressing (not always well) a wide range of issues and cultural challenges. Discrimination was a word used to describe how staff felt, which was often the result of poor management and a lack of opportunities for development as well as misunderstanding and a dominant set of white, middle-class perspectives. It was not easy to address. In 2020, with the visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement and the research that showed the sector-wide challenges of a lack of diversity, things did take on more momentum.

3. In what ways does your organisation demonstrate inclusivity, diversity, and a commitment to anti-racism?

CAFOD made a commitment to being an anti-racist organisation. This was rooted in its values of solidarity and the recognition that the equal value of all (by virtue of being children of God) is far from reflected in the systemic injustices in our world. Driven by our amazing new Director of People, Culture and Change, Karen Livingstone, this was underpinned by an Anti-Racist Action Plan and organisational awareness.

The Action Plan has four main planks: our commitment to Local leadership, agency and voice across our programmes work; ensuring our fundraising reflects the agency of people and communities and not painting them as victims; our policy and advocacy work always amplifies the voices and agendas of partners and internally our staff understand the issues, terminology and concepts that enable them to have the tools to work in this way, as well as explicit work done to enable opportunities, and better personal and professional learning and development.

Our strategy, Our Common Home, was revised to take on board anti-racist principles and we have an external Racial Justice Reference Group whose members, made up of experts from a range of countries and experiences, offer vital advice and support. Having an anti-racist approach embedded in our strategy was a vital aspect of ensuring that it was integrated in the way we do things. For CAFOD our commitment to local leadership is seen as a key expression of our anti-racist commitment – ensuring that we shift the power even though there is much more to do.

Our trustees were also engaged in this process. There has been training and a lead trustee identified for Racial Justice/EDI. They have met with members of the BAME network and the Racial Justice Reference Group. Trustees have been on a considerable journey.

At the beginning there was disbelief that an organisation such as CAFOD could be racist, whereas now there is a stronger understanding of why this matters to us. Our faith-based values and seeing anti-racism as being about how we do things, not just what we do, have been essential elements in helping us make the shifts we have.

4. Why is it important to focus on building anti-racist practices/an anti-racist lens within your organisation?

I could list a lot more, but the main issue here is a question of helping to develop a culture - of listening, engaging and taking time to reflect. What Pope Francis calls a Culture of Encounter, where we take time to get to know one another, to recognise each of our faults and failings, and can find vulnerability together.

By doing this, we are working towards practicing the belief in values of solidarity, and the recognition that the equal value of all by virtue of being children of God.

Reflections on Challenges

5. What challenges have you faced in trying to change your organisational culture?

There has been a tremendous amount of work done, and it has not been easy. It continues to be challenging because it isn't just about data or tick boxes – as important as that is in evidencing change. It is all about shifting a culture and mindset within our organisations. It is about a change of heart- not just a change of mechanisms and processes. Regular engagement with staff is essential and there has been acknowledgement of CAFOD's effort on this.

With our clear commitment to anti-racism, a challenge was managing feelings and perceptions of 'whatabouttery'. What about gender, disability etc. It's important that issues in relation to race are not always explicitly addressed through other protected characteristics. This continues to be an area of challenge, but our work on intersectionality helps us tackle it holistically.

The politeness still can mean that people feel uncomfortable calling in or calling out on behaviours, and we have put in place various training and reflection spaces on this, but it's still difficult for people.

6. Tell us a time when you failed. What motivated you to keep going?

I'm sure I've failed a lot of times. I remember my own defensiveness at the beginning, and very clumsy attempts to express solidarity. We are often conditioned to think that people being upset or unhappy means we have failed, but whilst I would never want to dismiss that, if we are addressing uncomfortable issues, then that will happen. What matters is that we are able to work it through.

In terms of what motivates us, as the agency of the Catholic church, our organisational values are very explicit and, of course, that means we have a framework around the dignity of people which we have translated into an organisational behaviour framework. Behaviour and encouragement and enabling staff to call out/in behaviours that they might find difficult in a respectful way is probably the area that is most challenging. We all make mistakes- we are on a journey to justice and of course none of us are single-dimensional people. But the need to recognise the inherent dignity of every person is a driving factor.

Reflections on creating change

7. How have you encouraged your organisation to transform its culture and structures? Can you share with us a time you have felt that you've managed to progress work on anti-racism?

I think we have done a lot, although the intersectionality of our different aspects is a dynamic that is constantly evolving and requires an approach of openness and humility whilst we recognise the pain. For instance, the way a neurodiverse colleague speaks to another could be interpreted in a discriminatory way, and whilst we appreciate the impact is different to the intent, it does require handling with sensitivity.

The implementation of our anti-racist Action Plan, Behaviour Framework and various trainings on microaggressions and intersectionality, have provided safe spaces to enable staff to unlearn negative behaviours, and to progress CAFOD in transforming its culture.

8. Why have you found this method of engaging with anti-racism worthwhile and useful for the past 18 months?

I have appreciated the space that the Bond CEOs group on Anti-Racism has offered. It has enabled us to share our different experiences and challenges in a safe space where we can grapple with the complexities we face. Despite having different organisational contexts, there is huge value in coming together. We have found out how much we have in common – for instance the underlying questions of practical application, culture factors and resources. It has been valuable to hear the experiences of others, and there are always good ideas to reflect on – and steal.

The support of others is vital because this is a big challenge, and the cliché of a CEO being in a lonely place is true. I know I have made mistakes, I have had to learn to be much more aware of my own defensiveness and to reflect on my own behaviour. It can be very annoying when you see others not reflecting on theirs but still giving you a hard time.

At CAFOD we have tried to implement the commitment to being anti-racist at all levels, which, of course, makes it complex, challenging and at times costly. We have had to invest both in external support, staff time, training and communications as well as change some internal processes. We aren't there yet, and I know that there are some staff who don't see the changes, or who feel things are moving far too slow. Being able to compare our work and efforts with other organisations has been helpful to see where progress is being made as well as reflecting on the challenges.

9. Reflections on the whole process

Bond has provided a number of resources which are helpful, but each organisation has to make it work for themselves, in line with their own values and culture. That is why things like group discussions and workshops are so important. It has to be embedded in the heart and work of the organisation. It isn't just a matter of changing language, it's about changing hearts.