

FAQs:

Responding to Common Arguments Against Adopting an Anti-Racist or Decolonial Approach to Policy and Advocacy



This document was **commissioned by Bond and Peace Direct** and **developed by The Advocacy Team** in response to feedback from policy and advocacy staff across the Bond membership and peacebuilding communities who identified a need for practical tools to help them to respond to arguments against adopting anti-racist and decolonial approaches.

The tool has been **written to give policy and advocacy staff among the Bond membership, including international development, humanitarian and peacebuilding organisations**, practical ideas on how they might respond to some of the most frequent challenges or ‘push back’ advocates face, or fear they will face, when trying to challenge the status-quo. **This will be a living document**, so we welcome additional questions and contributions on the arguments that advocates might use to put forward anti-racist and decolonial policies, frameworks and ideas.

We can't comment on this issue (e.g. examples of racism in public life) as this falls outside of our remit and we would find ourselves commenting on every issue that comes up.

Potential Responses

- Connect the issue to the organisation's stated mission and values, and demonstrate how it is connected to the organisation's agreed goals.
- Apply the framework in this resource pack to encourage a standardised approach to systematically track if, when and how the organisation puts into practice anti-racist or decolonial principles, policies and ideas. Track how these are changing over time. If there is little or no change, use this as evidence.
- Push for an agreed set of steps or frameworks that will be used to determine when the organisation will and will not speak publicly about racism or related issues. **Purpose Union's Stand framework** can be a useful tool to guide these conversations.
- Consider the role of intersectionality in any response.
- Explore if there are contradictions in the stated position, for example if the organisation is comfortable to communicate publicly about gender inequality but not racism.
- Consider the impact of employees, supporters and partners affected by racism of any decision the organisation takes.
- Consider if the organisation has any zero tolerance values and link to them.



“Of course, we can highlight evidence of disparities in certain issues, but our relationships with policy and political influencers will be put at risk if we start using radical terms like decolonisation

Potential Responses

- Share definitions in this resource (or other definitions) and make the case for why you believe it is important to use this specific language, in this specific context.
- Explain why other terms are not adequate for the intended purpose. For example, highlighting disparities does little to provide an explanation of the causes of these disparities. Unless we are willing to understand the cause, at best we limit our options in considering possible policy responses, and at worst we develop inappropriate responses that waste time and money.
- Challenge the assumption that using the language of anti-racism or decoloniality will inevitably compromise policy or political relationships. Ask for the basis for these assumptions.
- Share examples for where influential political figures are increasingly using this language, for example the recent call from Black Labour MPs, including a former Shadow Treasury Minister, to **decolonise the school curriculum**.
- Explore Jarell Skinner-Roy’s blog **Dismantling White Supremacy in Nonprofits: a starting point** for a reminder of the importance of being mindful about the language and narratives in our work.
- Lead by example, being mindful of the language you use to communicate within the organisation and externally with policy and decision-makers, in particular challenging some of the terms that are widely used in development but derive from problematic racist, colonial and militaristic histories. Matt Kerman’s blog **Do What I Say, Not What I Do: Decolonizing Language in International Development** is a helpful reminder of this history of the origins of some commonly used terms in international development.



This is yet another example of a sector that has been hijacked by people supporting divisive critical race theory and fuelling the culture wars. It just puts people off from what could be a very worthy cause.

Potential Responses

- Recognise that this is a strategy designed to close down discussions on issues that people feel are important.
- In these scenarios, think carefully about your specific goal for this conversation or interaction. What do you want to be different as a result of this conversation? Keeping this clear in your mind should help you to plan how to respond. Perhaps it is useful just to map that this is the position of the person you are trying to influence. Perhaps you want to probe to understand how carefully they have considered these issues or what their view is informed by. You may also see this as an opportunity to 'test' how they respond to your challenge. Equally, you may conclude that further interaction will not move you towards achieving your goals. If this is the case, protect your time, energy and wellbeing by ending the interaction as early as possible
- In communications training, some experts have successfully used techniques that **aim to move a person towards your position by encouraging them to agree with a single point**, and then another with the goal of slowly moving them a little closer towards your position. In response to the challenge above, a response using this technique might be:
 - **"I'm pleased you agree that this [insert wider issue] is a worthy cause."**
 - **"Many of us, perhaps including you, think that no one should be held back in life because of a characteristic they have no control over."**
 - **"Newspapers often tell us about the culture wars, but in the real world, you and I should be able to have a sensible conversation about a very real issue, right?"**

At each stage the goal is to encourage the person to say yes, or signal their agreement through non-verbal communication. The goal is not necessarily to get the person to agree to your original statement or proposition (this seems unlikely given their response) but to move them towards some degree of shared consensus. Note **that this can take time, and it can be emotionally exhausting, so think carefully about whether this is a technique you want to use** and refer to the point above about keeping your goal front and centre, recognising that it is sometimes best to end the communication early, especially so if you are personally affected by racism or any other equalities issue under discussion.



“We believe in decolonisation and anti-racism. But with limited time and resources, we have to focus on realistic outcomes and specific goals.”

Note that this perspective may not be listening to people of colour and diaspora colleagues and colleagues/partners from low and middle-income countries who, in large consultation exercises, have presented clear recommendations and who are advocating for the urgency of these issues.

Potential Responses

- Make connections between the issues the organisation’s existing priorities seek to address and related equity and or anti-racist issues. Where organisations are very resistant to practical action, situating anti-racism within their areas of focus (e.g. health, education, water and sanitation) can be a useful starting point.
- Explain that even if some ‘asks’ may appear more realistic they may not be in reality, and this is an example of putting organisational needs, perspectives and priorities above wider justice concerns.
- Point to existing resources that already exist to challenge the idea that organisations would need to create new resources.
- Reach out to other organisations that have already started making changes to become anti-racist and decolonial. Recognise that this is a long-term project and commit to taking actions and reviewing where you are.
- Monitor the way that time and resources are used across the organisation, and explore what this signifies for the culture of the organisation. For example, organisations that constantly overload workers, set unrealistic time demands, insist that everything is urgent and devalue the priorities of workers reflect a particular type of culture. Tema Okun’s work explores the concept of **white dominant/ white supremacist cultures**. It can be useful to see if some of the characteristics she describes are also at play.
- Test the assumptions about ‘realistic asks’, and if we are fulfilling our roles as advocates if we are limited to what the current government deems palatable. Do we know how far we are willing to compromise our views about what is needed to maintain access to government? Propose a balanced approach between the likelihood of a policy being accepted by the government and the potential impact of the policy, with asks that might be more difficult and take longer to achieve but could have more transformative potential.
- Refer to the organisation’s public commitments to a justice agenda, and **challenge how the organisation is putting this into practice**.
- **Connect with peers** in similar organisations who are already making changes and learn from their experiences.



“I used to support international development, in fact my family runs several orphanages and every year we go back to meet the community who are just lovely. But I resent this idea that we’re being told to hate our own history and to feel guilty all the time, when Britain is a force for good in the world.”

Potential Responses

- Ask or remind yourself, what is the goal of the interaction, this will help to inform if or how you engage with the second part of the statement.
- Review whose narrative or story we are telling and hearing. And what does it mean that we are promoting?
- Probe the first part of the statement: does the person still support development? What does that mean in practice? Are they willing or open to supporting the issue/ advocacy ask that you are speaking to them about? The answer to this question should inform your judgement on how to probe part two of their statement.
- If you chose to engage with the second part of the statement, you could make the point that every country is shaped by its history. Consider using examples close to home. For example, you could highlight how so many facets of life in the UK as we know it - from the creation of the NHS to the creation of new towns - have been profoundly shaped by the first and second world wars. The same is true everywhere.
- Recognise that these are uncomfortable issues which cause people to feel a range of emotions. Each person’s emotional response will be different, and it is likely to be affected by how each person and their families were affected by events. For every person feeling guilt others are feeling hurt , anger, sadness etc.
- Explore the dual nature of our relationships with the historic actions of our countries. For example, if a person feels pride about the UK’s role in the Battle of Britain, it follows they will also have an emotional response to the darker periods in the UK’s history.
- Challenge the idea that advocates are asking people to feel guilty by highlighting that many leading voices who are advocating for anti-racism have talked about the futility of guilt and how it limits far more meaningful and useful responses.
- Challenge the idea that international development is a neutral issue. The origins of international development (and underdevelopment) mean that international assistance is not a neutral endeavour. Many people arguing for a decolonised system often do not support the international development system as it stands and agree that substantial changes need to be made to how it works to move towards global justice.



“We absolutely should engage more Global South voices in this advocacy campaign/plan/policy process, but we’re really pressed for time so sadly it is just not possible.”

Potential Responses

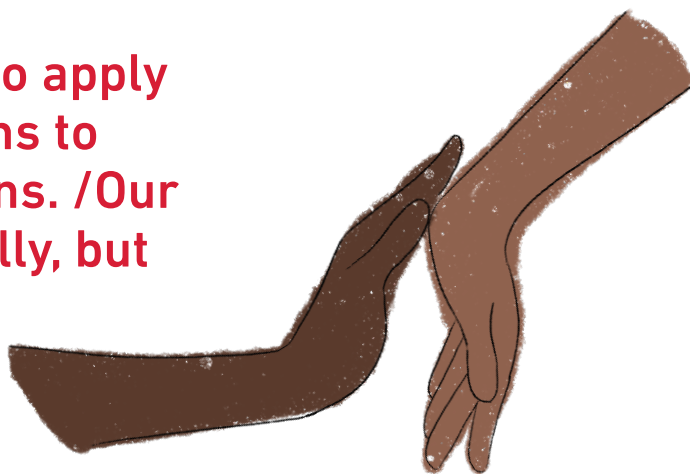
- Use the frameworks in this resource to encourage a more systemic approach to consultationco-working/co-creation. Be clear on how each of these things are different and will require different approaches, depending on what is needed for the specific project. These frameworks encourage teams to take the time to consider the differences in these definitions and decide which they are working towards as overall team objectives and in respect to specific projects. This will help guard against a culture and sense of urgency which can at times be an artificial barrier to change.
- If your team has already developed systems for how it tracks its work on decoloniality you can use this to remind leaders on what has been agreed with respect to how the team will work with partners in low- and middle-income countries.
- Consider pointing to the wider issues around being busy, examining its place within the culture more broadly and how it can be used as a tool and excuse for inaction. Is this a pattern? Documenting the approach to anti-racist and decolonial practices will help to shine a light on such patterns if they exist. **The Healing Solidarity** initiative has useful resources on this issue.
- Encourage the team **to examine the consequences of its decision not to meaningfully engage with partners.**
- In order to amend timelines, **ask if there would be an opportunity to jointly agree to push back a deadline for certain forms of less formal consultation.** Would there be other ways to engage at such times of high pressure that can prioritise different voices?
- Explore whether the decision is a reflection of some other systemic issue(s) within the organisation or wider ecosystem which must be addressed.
- Annex 1 outlines some questions to consider in making decisions on how to engage with a policy issue.



“We should definitely do more to apply a decolonial and anti-racist lens to our work. Then nothing happens. /Our organisation is strong externally, but nothing happens internally.”

Potential Responses

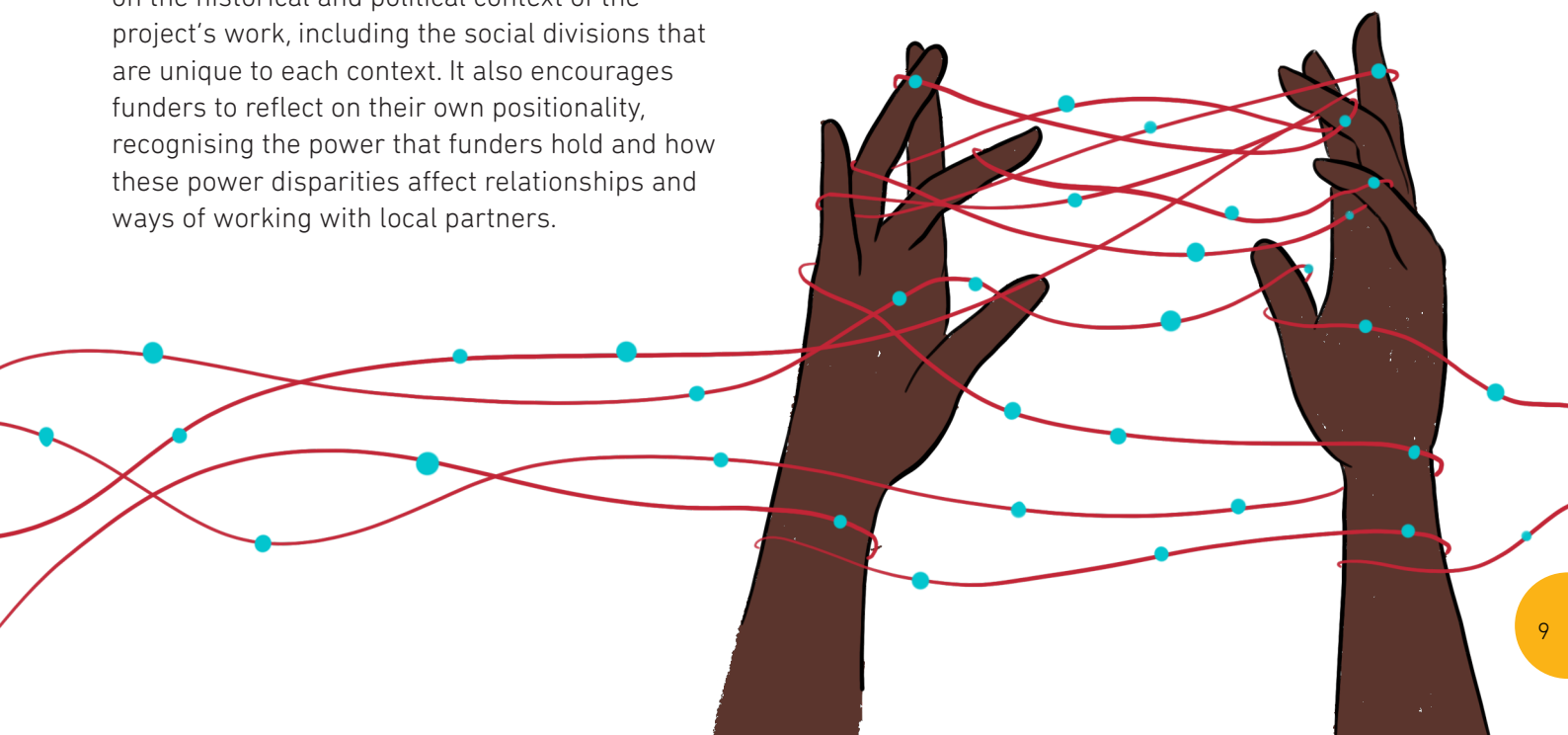
- Consider if there is a shared and agreed understanding across the organisation of what decolonial and anti-racist work means for teams and individuals. Often, nothing happens because no one really knows what these things mean in their organisational context, and they are just phrases that are used with little foundational understanding.
- Consider how not taking actions undermines the legitimacy of your policy and advocacy strategy.
- Consider the culture within your team and how decisions are agreed and implemented. For example, if your organisation sets a team work-plan with clear goals and appoints a person as being responsible for implementing decisions, encourage the team or leader to add this goal alongside other goals or decisions. Or alternatively, if your team or organisation does not work to a specific plan or strategy but discusses individual decisions in regular team meetings, try to make this a regular agenda item for team meetings. In short, try to integrate this within each organisation's system for decision making and accountability.
- Discuss the lack of action with other colleagues in your team or organisations. Do others feel the same way? What do they attribute the lack of progress to? What forms of power are impacting the inaction and the lack of communication about progress? What are the ways that conversations can be had in a sensitive and safe way about inaction?
- If it feels safe, raise the issue and the lack of progress wherever the opportunity arrives. This could be in cross-organisational meetings, in team meetings, in 1:1s or as part of anonymous or open feedback processes. Communicate why this is important to you and others, and what the lack of action communicates about the organisation.
- If you have the time and space among your existing work demands, work with others to take a structured approach for how you might advocate for progress internally (for example, by devising an internal advocacy plan). Do you have an internal diversity, equity and inclusion working group or equivalent you can discuss this with and get its guidance? Is there a member of the senior leadership team with specific responsibilities for equalities issues who you can have a confidential discussion with?
- The internal advocacy plan could include demonstrating, internally, practical examples of how peer organisations are putting these issues into practice, or sharing industry updates, useful blogs and articles on these issues.
- The internal advocacy plan could also include some key milestones (e.g. 3 months, 6 months, 12 months). After each milestone, reflect on the actions taken to advocate internally, the result of these actions and what this tells you about the organisation's commitment to the agenda. Also consider what milestones you'd like to achieve at different levels to reflect change at the individual, organisational and systemic level.



“We are focusing on locally-led development.”

Potential Responses

- Give encouragement to a focus on locally-led development and use this as a stepping stone for broader progress.
- Drill down to examine what a ‘locally-led’ approach looks like in the context of policy and advocacy. How will the organisation put this into practice? Implementing a truly locally-led approach to policy and advocacy could represent an important step forward. Explore whether what is happening is really progress towards being locally led or if it is in fact localisation which does not address overall structural issues.
- Make the case that adopting an anti-racist or decolonial approach will improve locally-led approaches and outcomes as this requires organisations to adopt a more holistic approach, addressing root causes of current power imbalances and why they have not yet been addressed. For example, an anti-racist or decolonial approach encourages teams to reflect individually and with their partner organisations on the historical and political context of the project’s work, including the social divisions that are unique to each context. It also encourages funders to reflect on their own positionality, recognising the power that funders hold and how these power disparities affect relationships and ways of working with local partners.
- Probe the statement further, and ask the manager or leader why they are focusing on one strategy (i.e. locally-led development) and not the other (i.e. anti-racist/decolonial approaches). The answer to this question will shed light on how deeply they have considered the issue and the ambition for the locally-led work.
- Encourage the organisation to reflect on its legal responsibilities, especially with respect to anti-racism.
- Highlight that there could be a risk around working on locally-led development without addressing racial equity, and recognise that locally-led development is not the final step to systemic change.



Annex 1:

Questions to ask ourselves before engaging in any UK advocacy activities:



Do we have the right networks, audience or evidence base to speak with legitimacy on this issue?



Are we the right organisation to be in the room in this instance, especially if there is limited space?



Have we made a sincere effort to give up space? Is there a partner or ally that would be better placed to take this opportunity forward?



If partners or local allies are not able to attend (due to an inappropriate agenda or structure or lack of translation), what steps can we take to remedy this in future? How are we collaborating with partners to prepare for future opportunities?



How are we using this opportunity to make ourselves (and the wider UK INGO sector) redundant in the medium to long term?



How can we as an organisation track and incentivise giving up and creating space, rather than taking up space for policy and advocacy colleagues (for example, in objectives and strategy development)?



How will your organisation/teams push back on processes that reinforce exclusion and reaffirm existing power dynamics?



What are your organisation/teams 'redlines' which, if crossed, will lead your organisation to say no to certain engagement?

