

Civil Society Policy Brief: Addressing Racism in Global Migration Governance and Policy (21 March 2021)



Civil
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Action
Committee

This policy brief is built on an ongoing series of dialogues since September 2020, among members of the [Civil Society Action Committee](#) (AC) and global and regional experts¹ on race and discrimination in the context of migration. The organizing of these dialogues and overall work on race and migration are co-led by AC members in its ad-hoc Working Group on Race and Migration, which was initially inspired by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement both in the U.S. and globally throughout 2020. Learning from BLM manifestations around the world, AC members have taken this first step to respond to the long-standing need to address race in migration more directly, to both internally reflect, inform and improve our own policies and practices within civil society spaces, as well as to deepen and focus our joint global policy advocacy on race and discrimination in partnership with States and other stakeholders.

This policy brief is the first public summation of what we have collectively learned, as well as recommendations from the series of dialogues so far, issued in observance of the [International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#).

The racialization of migration

The COVID-19 pandemic and BLM **shed a global light on the systemic nature of racial injustices in our communities and societies**. We have witnessed the stark contrast in how people of different races and ethnic groups were and continue to be impacted by the pandemic, and in their access to health and other public services at this critical time, including access to vaccine rollout and pandemic recovery efforts.

In this context, we should look more deeply at the issue of **race and its interlinkages with migration, development, and migration policy and governance**. In particular, the **systemic nature of racial injustice** and the racialization of the migration circle have been repeatedly identified as critical areas to directly address.

Racism and xenophobia cannot be merely reduced to individual cases and opinions but have to be recognized as **rooted deeply in our systems and societies** -- not only as a consequence, but also an underpinning in the way institutions are organized. Migration policies and policy-making spaces often perpetuate racial discrimination and injustice at all levels, much beyond individual examples. They are **structured in ways that produce racial exclusion** and are rooted in historical legacies that were intended to have these kinds of outcomes. Such historical and structural roots need to be better understood if they are to be properly addressed and officially recognized within systems, not just the activity of certain

¹ Expert speakers in the dialogue series so far include **Dr. Robtel Neajai Pailey** (London School of Economics), **Professor E. Tendayi Achiume** (United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism), and **Commissioner Margarette May Macauley** (Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons of African Descent and Against Racial Discrimination, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Organization of American States).

individuals. This cannot take place without a **change in the discourse**, not only opposition to racial and xenophobic *discrimination*, but the denunciation of the structural *injustices* that produce exclusion and oppression on the basis of race, and a total commitment to positive, transformative, and holistic policies tailored to eliminate systemic and institutionalized racism.

De-colonizing the migration cycle...

Unpacking the structural embedding of race requires a **reflection on the entire migratory cycle**. Whether through discriminatory structures in countries of origin -- which can push people to migrate, xenophobic discrimination due to national origin in countries of destination, or racial stratification in the global labor market -- racism is present at all stages of the migration cycle. More specifically, the **racialization of migrant categories and immigration laws** -- reflected among others in immigration and border enforcement law and surveillance, in the choice of vocabulary to describe what is perceived as distinct categories of migrants (e.g., expats vs migrants), the impact of national origin or ethnicity on access to visas, permits or the labor market – should be looked at as a result of the history of modern migration and the privileging of certain groups of people. Similarly, the **access to policy-making spaces** should be considered as a consequence and a cause of institutional inequalities that are designed to perpetuate themselves, because of restrictive visa policies or discriminatory hierarchies.

... and development

This also has a **strong impact on development**, starting with the term itself and the idea of “developed vs. under-developed or developing countries”, for example. The allocation of resources and framing of issues and priorities, the access to decision-making spaces and the ability to produce knowledge are all organized in a way that can tend to strengthen inequalities, including within the same organizations that advocate for greater diversity and often fail to implement that within their own structures and hierarchies. Migration can often be seen as the direct result of these global inequalities rooted in structural racism.

Referring to existing frameworks

At the same time, some **already existing international agreements provide solid frameworks and guidelines for change**, and can be used as **principles and practices for fundamental equality of treatment for all**, regardless of whether they have been ratified. These include:

- the 2030 Agenda, in particular SDGs 10 (inequalities) and 16 (inclusive and peaceful cities);
- the Global Compact for Migration (Obj. 7: *Addressing and reducing vulnerabilities in migration* and Obj. 17: *Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration*);
- UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (2001);
- International treaties (ex. the International Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination), or regional mechanisms (such as the Inter-American Committee against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Related Forms of Intolerance, and the Inter-American Convention against All Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance.)

The role of civil society: reimagining the framework

As civil society continues to unpack the intersections between migration policies and the anti-racism agenda, the following are some **suggested ways forward**, as highlighted throughout the dialogues on race and migration:

1. Continuing the discussion. The first one is simply to **deepen the reflection and continue the discussions** (such as those initiated by the AC's ad-hoc working group) whether internally among civil society, or by engaging with various partners to get a better understanding of the interlinkages of race and migration and their embeddedness in institutions and societies that lead to systemic racism and racial discrimination. Continued dialogue is especially encouraged with and among migrant communities who do not normally have equal and equitable access and opportunities to such dialogues.

2. Naming the problem. Racism is premised on imbalanced power relations, which in turn has also defined migrants' perceptions of themselves and how non-migrant populations perceive migrants. Addressing this directly will provide the basis for further action and make it possible to actually **name the problem and refer to racial and xenophobic discrimination and exclusion systematically** (beyond specific and individualized examples) while *putting light* on all racialized experiences, starting with the subtlest ones. These should be **documented and put forward in civil society reports** as often as possible, and further reported to institutions or special mandate-holders such as Rapporteurs or Commissioners (e.g. the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance). Where appropriate and necessary, add regional specificities and nuances. Also, the **intersectionality of race should be understood and addressed as a cross-cutting issue in all migration-related discourse**, similar to gender or age.

3. Holding public officials accountable. In addition to reporting cases of abuse, civil society has a responsibility to **hold governments and institutions at all levels accountable**, especially by referring to existing legal frameworks and requiring that these should be met. Issues such as staffing, pay, hierarchies, access to decision-making level and spaces, allocation of projects and resources should be put under close scrutiny, even more so when such institutions are advocates of human rights or justice in relation to migration. Governments should be called to develop and/or implement national plans of action against racism. Existing legal frameworks provide a strong basis for such discussions. We should also urge governments, institutions and all stakeholders to outrightly condemn and denounce acts of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against migrants.

4. Communicating and sensitizing. All the actors mentioned above, especially those who are directly in contact with migrants, **should be better informed, educated and sensitized** about the various forms of systematized and institutionalized racism and xenophobia they could find themselves in due to their work. At the same time, the **awareness** of human rights and civil society activists, journalists as well as the broader public should be **raised in the public space and discourse**. As such, racism should be explicitly included in public campaigns against discrimination and xenophobia. Public discussions (conferences, webinars etc.) targeting a wide array of organizations globally could also be organized to this end.

5. Increasing commitments. Civil society organizations have a responsibility to **look inwards for critical analyses, making sure the principles we advocate for are reflected in our own structures**. Working closely with human rights and racial justice organizations, and connecting those across regions and levels are also essential elements that can only lead to greater understanding and action from all actors involved. We need to be vigilant for new forms, manifestations and contexts of racism against migrants.