

IASC's Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) Meeting

3 February 2021

Summary Record

INTRODUCTION

The Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) convened on 3 February 2021. The primary objectives of this meeting were (i) to review the results of the IASC survey on racism and racial discrimination capturing best practices and (ii) to discuss and agree on the IASC Action Plan to address racism and racial discrimination within the system, while building on lessons learned from community feedback mechanisms, among others.

SESSION 1: SHARING OF BEST PRACTICES IN ADDRESSING RACISM AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE IASC

In her introductory remarks, the OPAG co-Chair, Ms. Valerie Guarneri welcomed participants and thanked them for their continued engagement and dedicated efforts in response to addressing racism and racial discrimination. Ms. Guarneri recalled the IASC Principals' statement of September 2020 that acknowledged that several staff members have been affected directly or indirectly by manifestations of racism or racial discrimination. This led to the Deputies Forum in July and the OPAG in August 2020 to consider how to capitalize on the infrastructure around exploitation from sexual abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH) to draw lessons and address issues of racism and racial discrimination and to devise an action plan for consideration by the Deputies Forum. Ms. Guarneri emphasized that the IASC Principals agreed that equality and non-discrimination must be guaranteed in the workplace as well as within IASC engagement with partners and affected populations. She furthermore referenced the IASC compilation of best practices to address racism and racial discrimination.

Ms. Gloria Nwabogu, Human Rights Officer, Anti-Racial Discrimination Section, OHCHR, briefed OPAG members on OHCHR's actions and its involvement in the Secretary-General Task Force to Address Racism and Promote Dignity. The Task Force is mandated to report in December 2021 on the status of racism and racial discrimination within the UN system and identifying measures to combat these and enact Institutional change. In follow-up to the Human Rights Council debate and an internal reflection, OHCHR has recruited a Senior Inclusion, Diversity and Gender Adviser and established a time-bound working group to improve organisational effectiveness that is reviewing recruitment practices, workplace culture and data management, drawing on examples from the private and public sectors. OHCHR is working on finalising an action plan around race, gender and other diversities later this year. Ms. Nwabogu shared five key observations to address racism in the workplace that the IASC may wish to take into consideration:

1. Critical role of leadership. The IASC Principals' statement was well received and she encouraged IASC Principals to continue their advocacy, reinforcing messages on racism and racial discrimination, for example in the framework of the annual UN International Anti-racism Day on 21 March.
2. An accountability framework is required to enact institutional change. She encouraged the IASC to consider establishing an accountability framework at both the country and global levels that focuses on personnel issues as well as affected persons, and to consider specificities around racial and other forms of discrimination.

3. Investment in dedicated human resource capacity: She recommended for the IASC to invest in dedicated human resources in form of IASC Focal Points or Special Advisers (in addition to existing capacity within individual agencies, such as in OHCHR, OHRM, UNHCR). She stressed the merits of assigning dedicated staff capacity on a time-bound and rotational basis, so as to increase overall ownership and benefit from diversity).
4. Strengthen synergies and foster links between the work of the IASC and of the UN system at large, including the Secretary-General's Task Force.
5. Strengthen participation of stakeholders and communities representing affected populations in the IASC, for example by expanding community feedback mechanisms and encourage staff to share their concerns and ideas.

Discussion:

The ensuing discussion demonstrated the commitment of all participants to diversity and inclusion within their organizations. OPAG members noted that accountability systems are key in supporting the effective follow-up instances of discrimination, as well as maintaining inclusive conversations and enabling an environment of justice and equality in the workplace. Participants generally welcomed the compilation of best practices, including its structure, strategic focus and the references to complaints and feedback mechanisms. Highlighting some of the initiatives already ongoing in their organisations, several participants committed to contributing to pro-active leadership on the issue of racism and racial discriminations within the IASC. SCHR urged for the prioritization of local partners perspectives on how racism and racial discrimination manifest in the field. Members requested recirculation of the compilation of good practice in an effort to link and refer to member-specific efforts of relevance and to clarify terminology; they also suggested maintaining the compilation as a living document, which OPAG members update regularly as required and to serve as a key collective reference of emerging practice. Several participants highlighted the co-relation of racism and the localization agenda. Racism and racial discrimination were also compared to the lack of gender equality in many workplaces, especially at senior level. A call was made to assess the need for identifying collective sanctions, in addition to those available at organisational level. Participants further agreed that it was important to learn not only from success stories but also from missteps or challenges. Recognizing the increasing xenophobia, misinformation and stigmatization of migrants and other vulnerable groups as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of participants noted the importance of strengthening terminology and communication, by humanitarian actors, addressing attitudes and language, on the portrayal of beneficiaries, and called for this to be reflected in the draft Action Plan. It was agreed that it is critical to gather data on race and ethnicity, despite the sensitivities, so as to establish a baseline against which to measure progress around equality and equal opportunities and to combat all forms of discrimination. Finally, several interventions underlined that culture change required a long-term approach and called for race and racial discrimination to remain on the agenda of the IASC.

Follow-Up Actions:

1. Reinforce the **compilation of Best Practices to Address Racism and Racial Discrimination in IASC Member Organizations** with the additional examples shared during OPAG meeting and post as a living document for OPAG members **[IASC Secretariat]**
2. Share examples of strategies, action plans, etc. to include in the best practices document to support/inform IASC member organizations efforts to address racism and racial discrimination **[OPAG members]**

SESSION 2: EFFORTS TO ADDRESS RACISM AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE IASC

The OPAG co-Chair Mr. Geir Olav Lisle introduced the second session, aimed at discussing the Action Plan to address racism and racial discrimination developed by Results Group 2 (RG2) on Accountability and Inclusion at the request of OPAG. He thanked the RG2 co-Chairs for their efforts on this time-critical work. The draft IASC Action plan focuses on the program side, specifically in respect to affected population, and is aimed at complementing individual organisation's efforts to prevent and eliminate racism and racial discrimination; it is also meant to raise awareness and contribute to learning.

Ms. Bernadette Castel Hollingworth, co-chair of RG2, explained that the draft Action Plan is based on the reflections of a small group of volunteers from the RG2 membership, with expertise around AAP or PSEA. She stressed that the draft Action Plan would benefit from further input from experts on anti-discrimination, in particular racism, issues and with greater awareness of relevant system wide efforts in this regard, including on the Secretary-General's Task Force. It would also benefit from learning from efforts to prevent SEA and SH beyond the specific workstreams of RG2. RG2 can advise on how to ensure ongoing AAP efforts to include anti-racism and discrimination. Other leads would need to be identified to take forward efforts on racism and racial discrimination in general.

Isabelle de Muyser, IASC secretariat, briefed on the genesis of the draft IASC Action Plan shared by the RG2 volunteers (including IOM, WFP, OCHA, 2 INGOs and one network of local actors). In line with the mandate of RG2, the Action Plan is informed by parts of the IASC survey, as it relates to affected people. She proposed OPAG to consider identifying a champion or a coordination mechanism established to ensure the issue is integrated across the IASC, including the Deputies Forum, OPAG, EDG, Results Groups, Entities Associated with the IASC, as well as other processes.

Ms. Tanya Axisa, the UNHCR RG2 Coordinator, presented the six main themes of the draft IASC Action Plan and their rationale, including:

- Ensuring non-discriminatory inclusion of all population groups in the program cycle
- Ensuring aid delivery does not discriminate against any population group
- Encouraging, listening to and acting on complaints of racism and discrimination
- Prevention of racist and discriminatory behavior against staff, partners and affected people
- Sharing and learning from best practices and efforts on anti-racism and discrimination
- Monitoring of progress on anti-racism and discrimination

The draft Action Plan is based on the recognition that RG2's added value lies in its focus on affected people and on offering resources that can help develop the overall understanding and good practice; the need to embed race and racial discrimination into RG2's tools while looking at all forms of discriminations; and finally the need for a long-term approach to reach culture change and put in place the capacity and time needed to discuss with all relevant people such as local actors.

Ms. Meritxell Relano, co-Chair of RG2 introduced the second segment of this session remarking that racism must be considered as one form of discrimination and treated in the same way as any other breaches of accountability. She stressed that the most established feedback mechanisms are those linked to PSEA. RG2 is committed to look at all forms of discriminations, in order to ensure inclusive accountability. She suggested to mainstream racism into existing workstreams, while also recognising the utility of a dedicated workstream in response to racism.

Ms. Wendy Cue, Senior Coordinator, Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Secretariat, pointed out that, despite all the guidance and tools put in place, allegations of PSEA are still being received. She therefore stressed the importance of senior leadership to achieve progress on this issue. The workplace environment sets the tone to allow people to speak freely about possible issues of misconduct. Ms Cue pointed out, frontline responders are predominantly male, while the

groups she is working on in to strengthen PSEA are predominantly female. The most important approach to address misconduct was to improve the quality of programming. UNHCR, under their PSEA championship, organized trainings and webinars to reflect upon these issues at senior level, to discuss how biases might interact with and influence power differentials and avenues to address them. She recommended applying a similar lens to the issue of racism. She finished by suggesting investing in better understanding where discrimination arises from in a country context and to address all forms of discrimination under one framework.

Mr. Lisle thanked the presenters and expressed appreciation for RG2's recommendation that racism and racial discrimination should be seen as a breach of accountability and as a core to the IASC commitment to AAP.

During the ensuing discussion, participants generally commended the Draft Action Plan as comprehensive and well formulated, thus providing a good basis for discussion. There was overall consensus that the Action Plan will be the way for the IASC to be held accountable and that a collective approach was the most effective way forward. Reiterating and complementing many of the points made in the first session, participants offered suggestions on how to improve the Action Plan, while also requesting additional time to extrapolate on suggestions in writing. They also suggested a review the Action Plan's terminology.

UNFPA indicated that, as part of their new championship on PSEA/SH, they intend to provide assistance and services taking on a victims-based approach and putting an enhanced focus on information and communications so as to create a safe environment for victims to come forward. Others underlined the impact of unconscious biases and stereotypes in addition to intersectional aspects of discriminations. While several members suggested building upon the experience gained around PSEA and existing complaint mechanisms, others suggested to modify the RG2 focus on PSEA in support of complaints mechanisms addressing all kinds of complaints. They also requested that targeted guidance is made available on how to respond to racism and racial discrimination, including to implementing partners. Participants agreed to transparently and proactively share learning. Country level monitoring was deemed essential in addressing issues of racial discrimination, despite a lack of available data; several IASC member organization are already reviewing and adapting their policies in this respect. OPAG members drew similarities with the Centrality of Protection workstream. Speakers reiterated the call to appoint dedicated staff capacity and advocated for OPAG to support mainstreaming the Draft Action Plan across IASC structures and to monitor progress over a medium to long term.

At the end of the discussion, OHCHR encouraged participants to continue to build upon the PSEA infrastructure, relevant complaints mechanisms, and to focus on supporting affected people. OHCHR suggested reviewing the draft Action Plans' terminology around preventing discriminatory behavior and adding a glossary. Ms. Nwabogu acknowledged that the collection of data was a sensitive issue which might have protection and privacy implications. Organizational culture change was the aim of the Secretary-General's Task Force and there was an opportunity to strengthen synergies with the work of the IASC. RG2 co-Chairs concluded the discussion suggesting the OPAG to consider recruiting a consultant to further develop the IASC Action Plan.

Ms. Mervat Shelbaya, the Head of the IASC Secretariat, noted that wide participation was deemed a precondition for achieving progress. UN IASC members were urged to ensure that the views of NGOs inform the discussions at the UN Secretary-General's Task Force discussion, as they currently are not part of the Task Force. In an effort to increase synergies, the OCHA ASG recently met with the USG for Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance. In March, the IASC Deputies Forum plans to discuss racism and racial discrimination. Closing the meeting, Mr. Lisle thanked all participants for the richness of the discussion. He noted there is a growing awareness on how racism and racial discrimination impact on the workforce, however there is still no sufficient discussion on how racism and racial discrimination impacts humanitarian organisations' engagement with affected populations.

Follow-up Actions:

1. Provide comments to the Draft Action Plan to inform IASC efforts to address racism and racial discrimination [**OPAG members**]
2. Finalize the draft action plan and share with the Deputies Forum ahead of their meeting on the issue on 18 March [**IASC secretariat**]
3. Expedite efforts for the inclusion of racism and racial discrimination in community feedback mechanisms and needs assessments [**RG2, HPC-SG and PSEA TF**]

AOB

Ms. Valerie Guarnieri concluded the meeting by thanking OPAG members and RG2 Co-Chairs for their constructive engagement throughout the meeting. The meeting closed on a reminder that the next OPAG meeting on 10 February 2021 would discuss the key findings and recommendations of the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls (GEEWG) as well as the required follow-up to strengthen system-wide accountability on gender.

ANNEX: PARTICIPANTS LIST

OPAG Co-Chairs	Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, Deputy Secretary-General, NRC Ms. Valerie Guarnieri, Assistant Executive Director for Operations Services, WFP
FAO	Ms. Daniele Donati
ICRC	Ms. Alexandra Boivin
ICVA	Ms. Mirela Shuteriqi
ICVA - ACBAR	Ms. Lisa K. Piper
ICVA – COST	Mr. Reza Chowdhury
ICVA - FRD	Mr. Azmat Khan
ICVA - IMC	Ms. Mary Pack
IFRC	Mr. Frank Mohrhauer
InterAction	Ms. Kate Phillips-Barasso
InterAction – Global Communities	Ms. Pia Wanek
IOM	Ms. Tristan Burnett Ms. Angela Steiger
OCHA	Mr. Rein Paulsen
OHCHR	Mr. Roberto Ricci
SCHR	Mr. Gareth Price Jones
SCHR - Christian Aid	Mr. Michael Mosselmans
SCHR – Save the Children	Ms. Leah Finnigan
UNDP	Mr. Peter Batchelor
UNFPA	Mr. Ingo Piegeler
UN-HABITAT	Mr. Filiep Decorte
UNHCR	Ms. Annika Sandlund Ms. Yvette Muhimpundu
UNICEF	Mr. Manuel Fontaine Ms. Meritxell Relano Mr. Omar Robles
WFP	Mr. David Kaatrud Mr. Gian Carlo Cirri
WHO	Mr. Rudi Coninx Mr. Kevin Ousmane

Results Group 1 on Operational Response Mr. Rein Paulsen

Results Group 2 on Accountability and Inclusion Ms. Bernadette Castel-Hollingsworth, Ms. Meritxell Relano

Results Group 3 on Collective Advocacy Mr. Michel Anglade

Results Group 5 on Humanitarian Financing Ms. Marcy Vigoda

Presenters:

Ms. Gloria Nwabuogu, Anti-Racial Discrimination Section, OHCHR

Ms. Meritxell Relano, Director, Office of Emergency Operations, UNICEF / RG2 co-Chair

Ms. Bernadette Castel-Hollingsworth, Deputy Director, Division of International Protection, UNHCR / RG2 co-Chair

Ms. Tanya Axisa, RG2 Coordinator

Ms. Isabelle De Muyser, Humanitarian Affairs Officer, IASC secretariat

Ms. Wendy Cue, Senior Coordinator, Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment, IASC Secretariat

IASC secretariat: Ms. Mervat Shelbaya, Head, IASC secretariat