

# Anti-racism & Localisation Community of Practice

## Theme 3: Whose expertise is valued in Nutrition in Emergencies?

February 2025

### Background

In the research article, **The racialisation of expertise and professional non-equivalence in the humanitarian workplace**, Junru Bian says, "...research suggests that embedded under the contemporary professional structure of the liberal humanitarian space is a covert power hierarchy fueled by perceptions of expertise and competency along racial lines—particularly around one's whiteness."

The report, **Co-investigators but with different power: Local voices on the localisation of humanitarian research**, by Fitzpatrick et al. states that, "...racist stereotypes may lead to double standards and a lack of trust in local actors and their capacity," and that, "'Global South' researchers may need to work harder to obtain the same recognition as their 'Global North' counterparts." (See subsection "Power" on pages 12-15 for further information.)

In a past article, **The importance of prioritising local expertise**, we reinforced that, "...the added value of someone providing technical support in a country where they also have strong contextual expertise to contribute—eg knowledge of the local language(s), customs, ways of being, communication channels, existing relationships, and partnerships with nutrition actors and beyond—is not something that can be readily strengthened in the way that technical expertise can."

*We can think of **expertise**  
as a highly developed skill  
or knowledge on a  
particular subject.*

(As defined by the GNC's A&L COP)

In February, the **GNC's Anti-racism and Localisation Community of Practice (CoP)** discussed the practical ways in which the unequal value of expertise remains a challenge to equity in the Nutrition in Emergencies (NiE) sector as well as approaches to address some of the challenges.

The following is a collection of key takeaways offered by CoP members during that discussion. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of any specific organisation or the Global Nutrition Cluster. Further, we recognise that the resources and CoP discussions shared are currently available in English only, which we acknowledge is a limitation.

## Key takeaways:

1

There are huge power dynamics, many unspoken, around expertise in aid. White 'Global North' expats are more readily seen as experts and their expertise is more recognised.

- **Real life example:** An idea put forth in a meeting by a colleague of colour is met with little reaction, while a white colleague rephrases and/or reiterates the same idea, and they receive appreciation and credit.

2

The 'expat bubble' exists and is very normalised within the aid sector. This typically manifests itself in white expat colleagues receiving preferential treatment in terms of travel and accommodation. Expats of colour are not seen as the 'typical' expat and are thus treated differently than their white expat colleagues.

- **Real life example:** While staying in the same hotel for a work assignment, the white expat colleague is given the room with air conditioning.

3

The humanitarian sector has largely embraced '**colourblindness**', which doesn't acknowledge that people of colour have to navigate the world and their work differently. For example, when there is a racist or covertly racist incident, which undermines one's expertise, people have different levels of risk when speaking out against it. Colourblindness is not virtuous, but rather a covert act of racism.

- **Real life example:** In moments when a person of colour feels patronised, they may second guess themselves, asking the question, "Am I being patronised because I am a person of colour? Or is this just a person who is naturally patronising to others?"

4

There are intersecting power dynamics between race, gender, nationality, age, and marriage, plus the added pressure for colleagues of colour to demonstrate the value of their expertise.

5

The expertise of global experts is often elevated because they have experience across numerous countries and regions, which is linked to their ease of mobility and travel (see ***CoP Theme 2: Passport Privilege*** for more). A local expert may have less exposure to other contexts, yet their contextual expertise and cultural knowledge is essential for NiE work to be successful. As a result, the global expert's knowledge may be more 'wide but shallow' versus the local expert's deep knowledge of their context.

6

Work needs to be done to improve the perception of expertise within countries.

- **Real life example:** Even within a country and its own government or ministries, experts coming in from other countries are more valued than someone from within the country itself.

7

There is a tangible divide between international and national staff. Those who have transitioned from national to international staff have felt how their expertise is valued differently and how they are given a higher level of respect.

- **Real life example:** International staff are often prioritised to attend meetings, workshops, and other important gatherings. This is unfair to national staff who may have strong—if not stronger—expertise and experience both in the field of NiE and within the context.

8

Expats are often selected to fill higher-level positions—even when they will rely heavily on the national team members to succeed in their role—over promoting national staff internally with their existing expertise and experience. Expats may also be offered longer term contracts or permanent positions disproportionately.

9

Researchers from the 'Global South' have learned to devalue themselves, their approaches, and their expertise, while research methods, tools, and approaches coming from international researchers are often seen as more valuable.

- **Real life example:** The lack of value placed on the expertise of field-based research staff means they are more likely to be excluded as co-authors on publications. Their work can sometimes be used in an 'extractive' way with inadequate credit given and without space for their intellectual contributions in other parts of the study, such as interpreting the findings.

10

Education systems in the 'Global South' largely have room for improvement as their curricula can be based heavily on repetition and less on critical thinking and debate. However, despite education systems increasingly functioning in line with international standards, they are still seen as less credible than 'Global North' education systems.

- **Real life example:** When colleagues from the 'Global South' move to the 'Global North', their academic credentials and expertise may not be recognised by their host country, forcing them to repeat their studies to receive the same credentials.

11

Most definitions of localisation come from the 'Global North'. However, we need space for national and regional actors to define localisation from their perspective and with their expertise. National and regional actors have always been implementing programmes and finding solutions in their own way, but their experiences are infrequently documented or shared, which leads to little recognition for their expertise.

- **Real life example:** Capacity assessment is almost exclusively done *to* local and national organisations *by* international actors, not the other way around.

12

We need to explore ways we can take this conversation to donors and those funding academic work in the field.

13

The practice of **'tokenism'**—defined as elevating an individual to a visible position to demonstrate diversity without intending to make meaningful change—is common within the sector and not a solution to deeper problems around whose expertise is valued in NiE.

14

When NiE work or research is published, we should question publications that don't include field-based or national staff. Implementing organisations should examine their standards for research and reinforce the value of contextual expertise throughout the research process.

15

When supporting countries, we need to find ways to ensure the appropriate national staff are positioned as leads.

- **Real life example:** Ensure national staff are involved and prioritised in emails, meetings, and invitations to work events, especially senior national staff.

16

Indigenous and local knowledge is often insufficiently acknowledged or completely ignored. Even worse, preconceived notions of what local communities need is justified by local 'ignorance' or a 'lack of knowledge'. We need to steer the conversations towards acknowledging the insights, experience, and agency of local communities.

17

There are double standards in terms of security management for national and international staff.

18

Participants agreed the work the GNC is doing to **prioritise contextual expertise** in addition to technical expertise is vital and should continue.

19

It is the responsibility of everyone to leverage what power they have to ensure local expertise is seen and valued. Here are some key actions expat practitioners can take in their roles:

- Practice self awareness and become cognisant of instances in which you are designated as an 'expert' unfairly.
- Examine your role, power, and privilege as a designated 'expert' and actively look for ways to disrupt behaviours that devalue, undermine, or take for granted the expertise of national colleagues.
- Courageously step aside when appropriate to offer your privileges and opportunities to national colleagues.
- Explore all opportunities to collaborate with national colleagues and encourage others in the sector to do the same.
- Take every opportunity to give due credit to national colleagues when discussing or showcasing work, projects, or research.
- Consider how the adage 'nothing about us without us' applies to our work.



Scan the QR Code to learn more about the GNC's Anti-racism & Localisation Working Group Community of Practice (CoP).