

Uncovering Blind Spots

Racial Equality and Representation
in the UN System



ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

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The briefing examines the evolution of racial representation in the UN, aiming to identify challenges and opportunities to promote racial representation and equality throughout the UN system, particularly in leadership positions. It analyses the racial diversity of leadership and staff, as well as the existing mechanisms to further racial equality, in ten key UN bodies. The study highlights the evolution of racial representation at the UN leadership from 2007 to the present, as well as the current state of metrics and policies to promote racial diversity in the UN system. It concludes with key recommendations to strengthen the UN's ability to combat discrimination and promote diversity in order to build an anti-racist UN.

Plataforma CIPÓ is an independent, non-profit, women-led Brazil-based think tank dedicated to international cooperation to promote climate action and sustainable development, from Latin American and Global South perspectives. CIPÓ develops evidence-based research and promotes dialogue and coordination between multiple actors to influence public policies, connecting the local to the global.

Blue Smoke is a working group created in 2022 to shine a light on elections and appointments to senior positions within the United Nations. The working group consists of UNA-UK, Plataforma CIPÓ and a consultant at Strategy for Humanity, and relies on the expertise of a wide network of experts, advisors and sources. We support multilateralism. We see the UN, for all its flaws, as the most legitimate body humanity has at present to bring states, civil society and other stakeholders together under the principles of the Organisation to stand up for human rights, sustainable development and peace.

Cover image: Secretary-General António Guterres and Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed share a laugh before the opening of the Nelson Mandela Peace Summit.

Credit: UN Photo/Ariana Lindquist. 24 September 2018. United Nations, New York.

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Executive Summary

The United Nations (UN) is the best-positioned multilateral agency to deal with the overlapping crises the world faces.

The organisation cannot fall behind the pressing need for a just system of global governance that addresses the disproportionate impacts of today's social, economic, political and ecological emergencies on populations historically marked by racial and ethnic inequality. Previous Blue Smoke studies demonstrated that this is a needed, but challenging call considering the UN's history of "ringfencing" leadership positions of key bodies for powerful member states – namely the permanent five members of the Security Council (P5) – with men from the Global North predominantly emerging as postholders. For this reason, it is crucial to understand how racism and racial discrimination intertwine with gender and nationality in the context of senior appointments, affecting the UN's ability to adequately represent "we the peoples".

This policy brief focuses on racial representation in the UN, identifying challenges and opportunities to promote racial equality across the UN system, particularly in leadership positions. The brief analyses the racial diversity of leadership and staff, as well as the existing mechanisms to further racial equality, in ten key UN bodies – DESA, DPO, DPPA, OCHA, OCT, WFP, OHCHR, UNDP, UNEP and UNFPA – primarily from 2007 to the present. Using the hetero-identification

method, the study detected that, despite recent progress in Diversity, Inclusion and Equity (DEI) to some extent supported by the UN Secretary-General, there remains a concerning lack of racial diversity in UN senior leadership positions. As shown in Table 1 below, from 2007 to the present, 31 individuals have been appointed by the UN Secretaries-General to occupy the highest posts of the ten agencies analysed in this policy brief. Of these, a minority of 35% (11 professionals) were non-white, including four Chinese men appointed as Under-Secretaries-General at DESA. Of the 11 non-white leaders, only five were Black or of African descent, four were East Asian (all from DESA), one was from North African/Middle Eastern, and one was of mixed origin. No Central Asian, South-east Asian, Hispanic, Latino/Latina/Latinx descent, or Indigenous professionals have held the most senior positions in these ten organisations over the past 17 years. This inequality is compounded by gender imbalance, with white men making up around 45% of the appointments (14 professionals) and men in general, both white and non-white, constituting over 64% of the leadership (20 professionals). In the past 17 years, only five non-white women have occupied senior positions in these key UN bodies, and one of them assumed the role on an acting basis after her predecessor resigned, rather than being initially selected for the post by the Secretary-General.

TABLE 1 - RACIAL HETERO-IDENTIFICATION OF UN SENIOR LEADERS (2007-PRESENT)

UN Body	Nationality	Gender	BAN KI-MOON 1ST TERM				BAN KI-MOON 2ND TERM				ANTONIO GUTERRES 1ST TERM				ANTONIO GUTERRES 2ND TERM				TOTAL - GENDER/RACE P. UN BODY					
			Non-White (1)		White		Non-White		White		Non-White		White		Non-White		White		Non-White		White			
			Black or African descent	East Asian	Mixed origin	White/Caucasian	Black or African descent	North African/Middle Eastern	East Asian	White/Caucasian	Black or African descent	East Asian	White/Caucasian	East Asian	White/Caucasian	Black or African descent	East Asian	White/Caucasian	Gender/Race	Non-White	White	Total		
DESA	Chinese	Man		1														Man	4	0	0	4		
		Woman																	Woman	0	0	0	0	
DPO	French	Man																Man	0	3	3	3		
		Woman				2													Woman	0	0	0	0	
DPPA	US Citizen	Man																Man	0	2	2	2		
		Woman				1													Woman	0	1	1	1	
OCHA	British	Man																Man	0	4	4	4		
		Woman		1															Woman	1	0	1	1	
OCT 21	Russian	Man																Man	0	1	1	1		
		Woman																	Woman	0	0	0	0	
WFP	US Citizen	Man																Man	0	1	1	1		
		Woman				1													Woman	1	2	3	3	
OHCHR	Jordanian	Man																Man	0	1	1	1		
		Woman						1											Woman	1	0	1	1	
UNDP	New Zealand	Man																Man	0	1	1	1		
		Woman				1													Woman	0	1	1	1	
UNEP	Danish	Man																Man	0	1	1	1		
		Woman																	Woman	1	0	1	1	
UNFPA	Nigerian	Man	1															Man	1	0	1	1		
		Woman																	Woman	1	0	1	1	
			TOTAL - GENDER/RACE P. 1ST TERM																GENERAL TOTAL					
Gender/Race			Non-White				White				Non-White				White				Non-White		White		Total	
Man			1	1	0	4	0	0	1	3	0	1	6	1	1	1	1	1	6	14	20			
Woman			1	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	1	1	1	5	6	11				
Total			4	1	1	6	1	1	3	2	3	9	2	2	11	20	31							

(1) Only racial groups with at least one representative in the corresponding organization are included.
 (2) Please note that OCT was established in 2017 and, as of today, has only had one person occupying the top position within the organisation.
 Source: Plataforma CIPD/Blue Smoke

In addition, Table 2 demonstrates that the UN generally lacks specific policies and metrics to promote racial diversity and address racism and racial discrimination, though this varies by agency. For instance, only one out of ten agencies analysed (UNFPA) publishes disaggregated data on staff ethnic origin. Only two agencies (UNDP and WFP) have developed

Anti-racism Action Plans, though these have not been publicly released and appear to be in the final stages of development. Additionally, at least four agencies (OHCHR, UNDP, UNEP, and UNFPA) have implemented special recruitment programs to promote diversity, albeit not always with a focus on race.

TABLE 2 – EXISTING MECHANISMS FOR RACIAL EQUALITY IN THE UN

UN BODY	MECHANISM							
	Disaggregated data on staff racial and/or ethnic composition	Awareness-raising activities (1)	Explicit reference to DEI objectives within recent strategic plans (2)	Website page dedicated to DEI policies	Dedicated DEI team	Anti-racism Action Plan	Special recruitment programs (7)	Explicit reference to intersectionality in organizational strategies (8)
DESA		✓						
DPO					✓(3)			
DPPA			✓		✓(4)			
OCHA			✓					
OCT								
WFP		✓	✓		✓	✓(5)		
OHCHR			✓				✓	✓
UNDP		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓(6)	✓	✓
UNEP			✓				✓	
UNFPA	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓

(1) Awareness-raising initiatives cover programs and events to enhance staff’s knowledge and further dialogue on anti-discrimination and race-related issues. It includes activities such as: webinars, online discussions, in-person debates, training programs, and similar.

(2) Examples of strategic plans considered in this analysis include [DPPA’s 2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#), [UNDP’s People For 2030 Strategy for 2019-2021](#) and [OCHA’s Strategic Plan 2023-2026](#) among other equivalent documents produced by the analyzed entities. The table indicates whether or not such documents contained direct and specific goals for achieving diversity, equity and/or inclusiveness in the entity’s workforce.

(3) According to [UN Today](#) and [UN.org](#) news articles.

(4) According to [UN Today](#) and [UN.org](#) news articles.

(5) In July 2024, UNDP’s Senior Advisor on Anti-Racism [publicly announced](#) the submission of UNDP’s first ever Anti-Racism Action Plan to the Administrator for consideration by the organization’s senior management. The authors have been unable to confirm whether the plan has been approved.

(6) WFP’s anti-racism action plan was initially scheduled for implementation around the third quarter of 2021. However, according to [the most recent annual report of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services](#), released in May 2023, the plan is still “in its final stages of development”. The authors have been unable to confirm whether the plan has been finalized.

(7) This category considered initiatives such as [UNDP’s African Young Women Leaders \(AfYWL\) Fellowship Programme](#) and [UNEP’s Young Talent Pipeline](#). While these initiatives do not necessarily incorporate a racial lens, they can help increase racial representation within these entities.

(8) This includes management and personnel strategies guiding internal organizational matters.

Source: Plataforma CIP0/Blue Smoke (Table 2 was developed exclusively using publicly available information. Initiatives that may be conducted internally by the entities but are not publicly disclosed are not included)

The policy brief concludes with recommendations aimed at strengthening the UN’s commitment to transparency, inclusion and racial diversity, as well as enhancing the organisation’s ability to tackle racial discrimination, in order to build an anti-racist UN. The recommendations include:

- **Collecting and transparently publishing UN-wide data disaggregated by race to facilitate regular assessments of the racial composition of its personnel at all job levels, including senior leadership positions;**
- **Developing racially sensitive UN-wide recruitment and promotion processes, along with dedicated paid internship, fellowship, and young professionals programs, designed to enhance racial diversity within the UN’s personnel at all levels;**
- **Mainstreaming racial considerations into all UN Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and anti-discrimination policies;**
- **Mandating all UN entities to develop anti-racism plans with specific goals, targets, and implementation deadlines.**

Introduction and methodology

The world is confronted with multi-layered and overlapping crises encompassing environmental, social, political and financial domains. While these crises affect the entire globe, their impacts are felt disproportionately by different countries and groups within them. In this context, racism and racial inequality stand out as particularly severe forces driving global disparity, with certain populations bearing the brunt of these imbalances.

As the most representative and robust international organisation, operating through a wide range of bodies and mechanisms, some of which are specifically designed to prevent racial discrimination, the UN is the best-positioned multilateral entity to address these imbalances. However, the organisation itself is not immune to the global inequalities and racial discrimination it seeks to address. Given the UN's extensive mandate on Human Rights and against discrimination in member states, it is crucial for the organisation's legitimacy to uphold these same values internally. While some progress has been made, including through measures to monitor and report against discrimination based on citizenship, ringfencing practices persist, with senior leadership positions in key UN bodies often being reserved for representatives from the P5 countries – the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.¹

Blue Smoke's previous research revealed that key UN bodies involved in development, environmental and climate action suffer from a striking underrepresentation of women and people from the Global South.² In a complementary way, other civil society actors, such as the Group of Women Leaders Voices for Change and Inclusion ([GWL Voices](#)), have

documented that several major multilateral organisations, including the UN, have never been led by a woman.³

Regarding racial diversity, the UN has historically lacked scrutiny on racial representation dynamics and the ways in which discrimination based on race can intersect with or occur regardless of one's gender or nationality. This oversight persisted despite increasing complaints of racial discrimination⁴ within the UN workforce, which led Secretary-General António Guterres to establish a task force against racism in 2020⁵.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief analyses the evolution of racial representation within the UN, focusing on challenges and opportunities for advancing racial equality across ten UN bodies:

- [Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(DESA\)](#)
- [Department of Peace Operations \(DPO\)](#)
- [Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs \(DPPA\)](#)
- [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#)
- [Office of Counter-Terrorism \(OCT\)](#)
- [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\)](#)
- [United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#)
- [United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\)](#)

1 See the chronicle of General Assembly action on ringfencing in Blue Smoke, [Ringfencing and the General Assembly: a briefing by Blue Smoke exploring General Assembly action on the issue of monopolies on top UN roles](#), 2023, p. 4-7. Monitoring of staff's nationality is also forwarded by the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) [Human Resources Statistics](#) and the [Resident Coordinator \(RC\) Dashboard Survey](#) from the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) Data Portal. For more information, see the section below.

2 Blue Smoke, [Unveiling Inequalities: A spotlight on senior appointments at key UN environment and development bodies](#), 2023.

3 GWL Voices, [We mapped the number of women leaders in 33 of the world's largest multilateral organisations](#), 2023.

4 See: Thalif Deen, [Staff Surveys Reveal Widespread Racism at the United Nations](#), Inter Press Service, 2020.

5 See: [Addressing Racism and Racial Discrimination](#) on UN HR Portal webpage.

- **United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)**
- **World Food Programme (WFP)**

These are among the largest UN bodies in terms of personnel and budget⁶ and are directly involved in the three core pillars of the organisation – Peace and Security, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development – and where, crucially, leaders are appointed by the UN Secretary-General (UNSG).⁷

Since 2007, six out of the ten analysed agencies (DESA, DPO, DPPA, OCHA, OCT and WFP⁸) *have* been exclusively led by nationals from a P5 country,

whereas the remaining four (OHCHR, UNDP, UNEP and UNFPA) have not been “ringfenced” in this way.

The study is organised into three categories – senior leadership racial identity, staff racial composition, and existing racial equality mechanisms – adopting different timeframes and methods for each, as summarised below. The analysis of leadership positions covers the terms of the last two UN Secretaries-General: Ban Ki-moon (2007–2016) and António Guterres (2017–present). In terms of methodology, the study compiled gender⁹ and nationality information, along

with the racial identity of the head of each one of the ten UN bodies,¹⁰ based on the list of racial groupings recommended by the UN [Joint Inspection Unit \(JIU\)](#)¹¹ – an independent external oversight body of the UN responsible for conducting evaluations, inspections and investigations system-wide. In 2022, JIU reviewed measures for addressing racism and racial discrimination in UN organisations. Based on stakeholder consultations and a review of academic literature, it developed a list of 12 racial groupings for their survey and recommended its use for UN-wide analysis. Despite its limitations, inherent in attempts to categorise a complex aspect like race, JIU’s list provides an important starting point for further analyses of racial dynamics within the UN system.

It should be noted that JIU’s list primarily relies on available nationality data and self-identification processes, such as surveys, where employees report their racial grouping based on predetermined categories that mostly consider geographic origins. However, JIU’s review acknowledges that this approach is limited, as it fails to capture the full ethnic or racial diversity of individuals with the same geographical origins.¹² To address such limitations, this policy brief combines public nationality data with information on ethnic and racial backgrounds. Briefly, this was

6 See [Personnel](#) and [Revenue](#) statistics from [UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination](#) (CEB).

7 By “appointed by the UNSG” it is meant that senior positions’ appointments in these organisations begin with a direct nomination from the UN Secretary-General. Other procedures may follow this initial nomination. For UNDP, UNEP, and OHCHR the UNSG’s nomination requires subsequent approval from the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). WFP conducts a joint nomination process, involving both the UNSG and the Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The leaders of the remaining organisations are directly appointed by the UNSG, who holds a significant degree of control over the appointments decisions in all of these ten cases.

8 Although there are different UN resolutions against ringfencing (that is, the practice of continually appointing individuals from specific states to specific roles), the highest position of each one of these six UN institutions is occupied by citizens of certain specific countries: DESA – China; DPO – France; DPPA – United States of America; OCHA – United Kingdom; OCT – Russia; WFP – United States of America. For more information, see the aforementioned [Blue Smoke’s policy brief on Ringfencing](#).

9 For gender classification, senior leaders were categorised as “Man” or “Woman”, based on information from their biographies and profiles. There is insufficient data to determine whether a leader is cisgender or transgender, as not all transgender and non-binary individuals publicly disclose their identity. This is a limitation that deserves greater attention in future research.

10 The study considers the head of each of the ten organisations based on the year of their appointment. This means that if, in a given year, one leader leaves office and another takes over, only the new appointee is included in our analysis for that year.

11 The list identifies staff members based on their national, ethnic and cultural origins, crossing this information with a list of subregions similar to that used by UN human resources for geographic workforce categorisation. For more information, see [UN JIU’s list of racial groupings](#) at JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1, p. 14, box 2. In this policy brief, while Table 1 shows disaggregated data, individuals classified as “White/Caucasian” are categorised as “white”, and those in other specified groups are categorised as “non-white”.

12 [JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1](#), p. 13.

accomplished via hetero-identification¹³ – a method of ethno-racial identification based on the evaluation of third parties, commonly a diverse committee of scholars, professionals and/or civil society actors. In this research, hetero-identification primarily relied on nationality information, supplemented by phenotype considerations when the link between nationality and JIU’s racial groupings was inconclusive. To minimise implicit or explicit bias, a diverse research team conducted this process, followed by a rigorous peer-review.

For the staff composition category, the study investigated historical and current data based on documents, statistics and information published by the UN in the public domain, following a strict checklist process.¹⁴ Finally, regarding racial equality mechanisms, the study considered only the UN’s instruments, measures, planning and policies that are currently in operation or were in operation from 2007 to the moment of writing (mid-July 2024). For this component, the methodology involved a thorough search of the organisations’ websites, also using a comprehensive checklist of sources. This approach enabled the research team to consult not only more accessible information, such as that on the organisations’ main web page, but also documents that required a more in-depth search to be found.

It is important to note that all ten analysed organisations are subject to anti-misconduct and anti-discrimination regulations set by higher UN bodies. DESA, DPO, DPPA, OCT, OHCHR, OCHA and UNEP¹⁵ are part of the UN Secretariat and are therefore compelled by [UN General Assembly \(UNGA\) resolutions](#), as well as the Secretariat’s [ethical standards](#), [accountability instruments](#) and [transparency policies](#). In

contrast, UNDP, UNFPA and WFP, as UN funds and programmes, are not bound to the Secretariat’s internal regulations but are still subject to UNGA resolutions and broader [UN-wide policies](#) and [oversight mechanisms](#).

While more general, system-wide instruments are essential, they do not preclude UN bodies from developing their own policies and standards. In fact, more specific and detailed measures are often necessary tools for effective racial equality and anti-racism efforts. Therefore, although broader UN-wide instruments are mentioned when relevant, the research focuses on regulations, policies and standards developed by each of the ten organisations. It should be noted, however, that even though the UN and its bodies have developed policies to promote equality and [anti-discrimination within member states](#), these have not necessarily been incorporated into their internal processes. Although this greater focus on external operations is to be expected, given that the UN’s mechanisms should serve the world rather than be inwards oriented, this mismatch between external and internal actions can harm the UN’s credibility. Therefore, this study devotes significant attention to analysing and offering insights on how to enhance the UN’s ability to translate the principles and commitments it promotes among its member states into effective internal policies.

The research methods outlined above were complemented by five interviews with current and former staff members, who provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of promoting equality within the UN. To ensure the anonymity of our sources, their names, positions, and any information that could identify them or their organisations within the UN system are not disclosed.

13 Hetero-identification is a well-established and legislated procedure. For instance, the method is used in Brazil for ensuring the accuracy of the self-identification process of individuals eligible for race-oriented affirmative action in federal examinations for positions in Brazil’s universities and public service. The limitations of this approach are acknowledged: there is a risk that a small number of individuals may be categorised differently from how they self-identify, as the authors’ perception of racial identities features cannot fully capture the complexity of racially informed experiences and backgrounds, which vary across different contexts. Nonetheless, this method is seen as a valuable tool for analysing the racial landscape within the UN leadership. Given the lack of public data on this topic, hetero-identification remains as the most viable option available.

14 The check-list process used in this study indicates sources where data on staff’s racial composition and the organisations’ racial equality mechanisms can be found. The checklist, arranged from most to least publicly accessible, includes: the UN website; the ten UN bodies’ website; Documents published by the ten bodies; UN documents; Email sent to the ten bodies; and when information was not available within the UN system, other publicly available sources were consulted.

15 Although retaining its original title as a Programme, UNEP is part of the UN Secretariat.

Moreover, an email was sent to the leadership and/or main offices of each organisation, including a letter outlining the Blue Smoke project and the goal of this research, along with six questions aimed at addressing gaps in publicly available information.¹⁶ By the conclusion of this research, only one of the ten organisations contacted – UNDP – responded, and the information provided was incorporated into the study.

This policy brief is organised into two main sections. Section one provides an

overview of how racial inequality has been addressed at the UN and outlines its main mechanisms for promoting racial equality. Section two presents an analysis of the ten UN bodies under study. The conclusion draws comparisons between bodies where states have not monopolised leadership positions over the last 17 years and those where they have, as well as between the two most recent Secretaries-General. The policy brief concludes with policy recommendations aimed at improving the UN’s efforts to promote racial diversity, equality and anti-discrimination.

The fight against racism at the UN: an overview

The UN has been addressing issues related to race since its inception. The very first article of the 1945 Charter states that respect for human rights must be ensured “for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion”.¹⁷ According to a [2020 JIU Review](#), over 30 mandates and legal instruments have been adopted under the auspices of the UN addressing racism and racial discrimination in countries. Although developed for Member States, these mechanisms “have been inspiring and providing the basis for internal guidance for the United Nations system”.¹⁸ These instruments include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the [1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) (ICERD) and the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA). The latter was adopted in 2001 as an outcome of the UN General-Assembly-launched World Conference Against Racism (WCAR).

The adoption of DPPA was marked by intense controversy. The final document faced criticism from the United States and Israel, which withdrew from DPPA’s negotiations citing its lack of references to antisemitism. At the same time, the [WCAR Non-Governmental Organisations \(NGOs\) Forum Declaration](#), issued on the sidelines of the conference, was excluded from the official proceedings due to its strong language against Israel’s actions in Palestine.¹⁹

Despite the controversies surrounding its negotiations, DDPA is widely considered a landmark UN document as it was the first to directly link the fight against racial discrimination with decolonial, anti-racist, and anti-xenophobic commitments. It is also the first to explicitly use the term “intersectional discrimination”.²⁰ In this regard, DDPA provides a solid conceptual basis for UN bodies

16 The questions posed to the bodies are the following: 1. Does the agency utilise any racial categories to identify the composition of its leadership and staff? If so, could you please specify the categories employed? 2. When did the agency commence collecting data on the racial diversity of its staff? 3. Would it be possible for us to access the relevant data or any publicly available information that would help improve the understanding of racial diversity in the agency’s leadership and staff? 4. Are there any mechanisms in the agency to promote racial equality and/or to address issues of racial inequality, racism and/or racial discrimination? If so, which mechanisms are those? 5. When did these mechanisms start to be implemented? 6. Is there any evaluation, internal or external, on the implementation of these mechanisms?

17 [UN Charter](#), 1945, p. 3, emphasis added.

18 [JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1](#), p. 1.

19 D. Petrova, ‘[Smoke and Mirrors: The Durban Review Conference and Human Rights Politics at the United Nations](#)’, Human Rights Law Review, 2010.

20 E. Tendayi Achiume and Gay McDougall, [Anti-Racism at the United Nations](#), AJIL Unbound, 2023, p. 84.

dedicated to populations historically harmed by colonial legacies, such as the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the Permanent Forum of People of African Descent (PFPAD) and the United Nations Asia Network for Diversity and Inclusion (UN-ANDI).

By promoting intersectional lenses and policies, Durban expanded and strengthened the institutional space through which anti-racist civil society could affect UN policy, which has been essential in instances where the organisation adopted approaches considered problematic from a racial equality perspective. For instance, in the aftermath of the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd in May 2020 in the US, which triggered a series of uprisings around the world denouncing racism in police systems, the UN initially instructed its staff to not engage in public demonstrations regarding Floyd's case. The ban was only lifted after significant backlash.²¹ In June 2020, a group of more than 20 UN senior leaders issued a [statement](#) expressing solidarity with the demonstrations about Floyd's case and called on the UN to "go beyond and do more" against racism. Their letter emphasised that to "initiate and sustain real change, we also must have an honest assessment of how we uphold the UN Charter within our institution".

In response to these developments, in June 2020, the Human Rights Council (HRC) held an [urgent debate](#) about systemic and anti-black racial inequality in law enforcement, with discussions suggesting the idea of establishing an international independent commission of inquiry into the US law enforcement system. However, this proposal faced significant backlash from Western European and Others Group (WEOG) countries.²² Instead, the HRC decided to request a report from the High Commissioner, which paved the way for a HRC resolution

known as the [George Floyd Resolution](#), which established the [Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in the Context of Law Enforcement \(EMLER\)](#). The mechanism, designed to help protect the rights of African descent against the excessive use of force through the transformation of law enforcement systems, emerged in a context where the UN was also advancing efforts such as the [Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities](#). This platform, comprising over 20 UN bodies,²³ seeks to enhance dialogue and cooperation among UN entities on this issue, with the [Network Work Plan 2021-2025](#) emphasising the need to address the linkages between racism, discrimination and diversity in both the UN's internal matters and external policies and activities.

The [calls for change](#) also reached the UN Secretariat. In June 2020, during a [town hall meeting in New York](#), Secretary-General (SG) António Guterres, referencing the murder of George Floyd, stated that "if racism is something that exists everywhere, racism also exists within the United Nations". Subsequently, in September 2020, the SG launched the [Task Force on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity For All In The United Nations](#).

The Task Force's first system-wide initiative was the [2020 UN Survey on Racism](#), which invited all 37,276 employees to share their experiences of workplace discrimination. However, only 22% (8,052) of employees responded, a response rate deemed low by the Task Force.²⁴ Among the respondents, the majority (25.7%) self-identified as "white". Among other things, the survey revealed that

"one in three respondents mentioned experiencing racial discrimination based on national origin, racial identity or gender identity"²⁵,

21 See Colum Lynch, [U.N. Reverses Ban on Staff Participation in Anti-Racism Protests](#), Foreign Policy, 2020.

22 E. Tendayi Achiume and Gay McDougall, [Anti-Racism at the United Nations](#), AJIL Unbound, 2023, p. 84.

23 Current UN bodies include: DESA, DDCO, DGC, DPA, DPKO, ILO, OCHA, OHCHR, OSAPG, PBSO, UNAIDS, UNAOC, UNDP, UNEP, UNHCR, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNITAR, UNESCO, UNODC, UN Women, WFP and WHO.

24 Task Force on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity For All In The United Nations, [Results from the 2020 United Nations Survey on Racism](#), 2021, p. 27.

25 Ibid., p. 28.

highlighting that identity and background are significant sources of discrimination for a substantial number of UN employees. Resembling initiatives have also spread across institutions within the UN system. For instance, [UNOG Staff Union](#) and [UN-ANDI](#) issued their own surveys and reports, which reached similar conclusions: “The majority of [...] respondents [...] noted that they had experienced racism and bias, as well as the distress caused to them in terms of health, career and well-being”.²⁶

Based on the 2020 system-wide survey results, the Task Force elaborated a [Strategic Action Plan](#) on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity for All in the UN Secretariat (SAP). The document, released in December 2021, provides a framework and a set of measures “to transform the United Nations to a workplace where racism is actively addressed”.²⁷

Regarding the UN internal efforts, further progress includes the 2021 [Addressing Racism and Racial Discrimination Action Plan](#), released by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), a high-level humanitarian coordination platform established by the UNGA. The document calls all its member organisations²⁸ to take “practical and tangible actions” against racism and discrimination. Since 2022, the UN has also had a [multidisciplinary Working Group of Focal Points on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion \(DEI\)](#). Established in 2022 by the Human Resources Network (HRN) at the request of the UN High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM), the working group produced a [DEI Glossary](#), which compiles [key principles](#) and [good practices](#). In June 2022,

the UN also established the Anti-Racism Team (ART), which became the Anti-Racism Office (ARO) in December 2023 following the approval of UNGA [Resolution 78/253](#). ARO oversees, coordinates and monitors the implementation of the Strategic Action Plan with the support of a network of Anti-Racism Advocates (ARAs) placed in all duty stations across the UN global Secretariat.²⁹ In addition, the office has been promoting awareness-raising initiatives for the public, such as the [Addressing Racism And Racial Discrimination webpage](#), and organising online [events](#) and [discussions](#) involving UN staff.

Despite these recent achievements and the long-standing regulatory frameworks designed to prevent different types of discrimination in the workplace,³⁰ significant gaps remain in UN regulations and policies specifically aimed at promoting racial equality or addressing racial discrimination. According to JIU’s Review (p. 38): “racism and racial discrimination are mentioned or often implied as wrongdoing and acts of injustice. They are seldom fully conceptualised or operationalised”. For example, the [UNSG’s reports on the Secretariat’s staff demographics](#) provide data on job position, gender, age, and nationality but do not include information on racial parameters.

Similarly, the [Human Resources Statistics](#) of the UN system’s Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) disaggregates the UN workforce by a wide range of categories, except race. Other UN databases include the [Resident Coordinator \(RC\) Dashboard Survey](#), which displays information on the gender, function, level, agency of origin, nationality

26 Shihana Mohamed, [Reports from a survey on racism and racial discrimination in the UN system](#), UN Today, 2023.

27 Task Force on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity For All In The United Nations, [Strategic Action Plan: Report of the Secretary-General’s Task Force on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity for All in the United Nations Secretariat](#), 2021, p. 5.

28 The members of the IASC are the heads or their designated representatives of the UN operational agencies (FAO, IOM, OHCHR, OCHA, UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, UN-HABITAT, UNFPA, UN Women, WFP and WHO), in addition to partner organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Bank.

29 See: Prisca Chaoui, [Striving for an anti-racist workplace](#), UN Today, 2024; and Mollie Fraser-Andrews, [The Anti-Racism Advocates: moving from dialogue to action](#), UN Today, 2024.

30 See: ICSC [Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service](#), the UN [Office of Internal Oversight Services](#) (OIOS), the [UN Ethics Office](#) and the [UN HR Portal](#).

and region of origin for all UN Resident Coordinators.³¹ In addition, [the Gender Parity Dashboard](#) informs the percentage of international staff who are men and women in each body of the UN Secretariat. Despite covering a wide range of UN staff members, neither dataset includes any information on race. Racial dimensions are equally overlooked in key documents, including the [Secretary-General's bulletin](#) on discrimination, harassment, and abuse of authority, which makes only a single reference to race, acknowledging it as a source of discrimination but including no provisions to address the issue. Even the 2030 Agenda, despite its motto "[Leaving no One Behind](#)", does not adequately express commitment to racial equality in its goals, targets and indicators.³²

Racial inequalities are also present in the way the UN recruits its staff and senior leadership. Article 1, paragraph 101(3) of the UN Charter emphasises that: "Due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible",³³ with this principle being firmly reinforced by several UNGA resolutions. However, there is still a long way to go to put these commitments into practice. Blue Smoke's policy brief "Ringfencing and the General Assembly" reveals that since 1995, 20% of UN senior appointments have been allocated to P5 countries. Between 2017 and 2022, 44.4% of senior appointees were nationals from the Western European and Other Group.³⁴ Despite the absence of racially sensitive data, these statistics demonstrate that the appointment of UN leadership is heavily influenced by geopolitical dynamics, creating additional barriers to improving racial equality in these key positions.

These gaps highlight a critical imbalance in how the UN addresses race compared to other categories. Race serves as both a means of discrimination and a category that is itself discriminated against, as it is neither reported on nor addressed by the UN with the same emphasis as other social markers such as nationality and gender. As demonstrated in this section, progress has been made in terms of establishing mechanisms for fighting against racism and promoting equality. For instance, the greater openness to civil society facilitated by the Durban Declaration has pushed the UN to deepen its awareness of racial dimensions in both external and internal operations. However, this policy brief also reveals that while the UN has numerous instruments to address workplace misconduct, these tools often lack a deeper understanding of racism and racial discrimination. As such, race and racial diversity, despite being mentioned, are still far from being thoroughly examined and identified. This seriously harms the UN's ability to meet its own transparency and non-discrimination standards, which are (or should be) central to its mission. In a nutshell, the UN's legacy demonstrates that the organisation can and should "go beyond and do more" to tackle racial inequalities. While these transformations must be system-wide, the next section analyses how ten UN bodies have addressed racial dimensions, aiming to identify challenges and best practices to enhance their efforts to promote racial equality, particularly among their senior leadership and staff.

31 Resident Coordinators (RCs) are the highest-ranking country-level representatives in the UN Development System. See more at UNSDG [The Resident Coordinator](#) webpage.

32 See: American Association for the Advancement of Science, [Eliminating Racism through the 2030 SDGs](#), 2021. In light of this gap, the Brazilian government has recently launched efforts to generate debate within the UN around the idea of a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 18 on Ethnic-Racial Equality. See: [SDG 18-Ethnic-Racial Equality in the 2030 Agenda: the Brazilian experience for the construction of a new sustainable development goal](#) (HLPF 2024 Side Event).

33 UN Charter, 1945, p. 18.

34 Blue Smoke, [Ringfencing and the General Assembly: a briefing by Blue Smoke exploring General Assembly action on the issue of monopolies on top UN roles](#), 2023, p. 9.

Racial (in)equality in ten UN bodies

This section examines ten key bodies central to the UN's mission of promoting Peace and Security, Human Rights and Sustainable Development. It begins with six entities where, since 2007, a single P5 country has held a monopoly over the top position: DESA, DPO, DPPA, OCHA, OCT³⁵ and WFP. The analysis then shifts to four non-monopolised entities – OHCHR, UNDP, UNEP and UNFPA. For each organisation, the policy brief covers three analytical categories: the racial composition of senior leadership using the hetero-identification method, the racial diversity of staff, and the mechanisms in place to promote racial equality.

MONOPOLISED BODIES

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS (DESA)

From 2007 to 2024, DESA has had four Under-Secretaries-General, all of whom have been East Asian men of Chinese nationality. Two of these appointments were made by Ban Ki-moon, one in each of his terms, and the other two by António Guterres, also one per term. This pattern underscores the ringfencing practices previously discussed, revealing how the dominance of Chinese nationals in DESA has resulted in a racial and gendered prevalence of East Asian men in this key position.

Regarding overall staff composition, this research found no public data produced by DESA on the racial identity of its employees, regardless of their positions. DESA conducts the [Annual Highlights Report](#), featuring the section “UN DESA in Numbers”. This section includes statistics on projects and website reach, as well as the percentage of female³⁶

staff members per professional category and a chart on gender parity in these same categories.³⁷ Like other UN bodies, DESA is also featured in the UN Secretariat Gender Parity Dashboard and the CEB Human Resources Statistics – both of which, as noted in the introduction, do not account for race or ethnicity. This means that while DESA appears on general UN platforms and demonstrates an interest in assessing the gender composition of its staff, it does not publicly disclose information related to race or ethnicity. This lack of racially-sensitive data is particularly problematic given the equally limited mechanisms designed to advance racial diversity and equality at DESA.

The research undertaken for this policy brief revealed that the few platforms DESA developed for debating equality, diversity and inclusion lack instruments to translate these discussions into internal guidelines and policies. For instance, the organisation conducts Expert Group Meetings (EGMs), which are high-level dialogues focused on policies, practices and lessons learned, and are designed to open discussions on themes not typically addressed elsewhere, such as discrimination and race. While previous EGMs have explored issues such as [Social Inclusion](#) and [Indigenous Peoples](#), which are closely related to racial equality and minorities' rights, an assessment of these meetings' documents and agenda³⁸ shows that discussions predominantly centre on target countries rather than addressing the internal challenges faced by DESA.

Similarly, starting in January 2020, DESA launched a [series of webinars](#) featuring

³⁵ Please note that OCT was created in its current form 2017 only.

³⁶ Considering gender is not strictly biological, but composed of sociopolitical factors, we prefer the term “woman” rather than “female”. In this policy brief, we only use “female” when referring to documents or texts that work with this term.

³⁷ The chart also affirms that “UN DESA Staff represent more than 94 countries worldwide, from all world regions”, but it has no disaggregated data on these countries and regions.

³⁸ See, for example, the 2007 [Final Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Creating an Inclusive Society: Practical Strategies to Promote Social Integration](#). It is important to note that this is the only EGM report publicly available on the [Social Inclusion section](#) of DESA website. Links to other reports are either broken or misdirected.

academics and other professionals to discuss topics related to the department's mandate.³⁹ According to information available in DESA's website, none of the webinars specifically addressed race or racism. However, some touched on related issues, such as ageism and the role of science and technology in addressing social disparities.⁴⁰ Separately, DESA's Division for Social Inclusive Development (DISD) in collaboration with the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) held an online seminar in March 2023 titled "[Addressing Ethnic Inequality: Comparative Experiences](#)".

Although over time DESA has created platforms for dialogue on inequality and its facets, there is no public information available to indicate the impact, if any, of these initiatives on the workplace or whether these discussions are translated into actionable measures or guidance for employees. DESA's lack of specific mechanisms and processes can be partly attributed to its integration within the broader framework of the UN Secretariat's procedures and policies. Despite a growing interest within the organisation in addressing the challenges faced by marginalised groups, this research indicates that much of the current dialogue remains outward-focused, though it holds potential for driving internal change. To harness this potential, DESA could implement tools such as racially sensitive guidelines, surveys, and capacity-building programs to convert these broader anti-discrimination discussions into practical outcomes.

DEPARTMENT OF PEACE OPERATIONS (DPO)

Established in 1992 as the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), this body was renamed and restructured in January 2019, becoming the Department of Peace Operations (DPO). This policy brief analysed

senior positions both before and after the restructuring, identifying that from 2007 to 2024, DPO (formerly DPKO) has had three Under-Secretaries-General for Peace Operations, all of whom were French white men. Two were appointed by Ban Ki-moon, each during one of his terms, and the last was appointed during António Guterres' first term.⁴¹ This demonstrates how ringfencing practices can contribute to a lack of diversity not only in terms of nationality but also in terms of race and gender.

The Department does not publish data on the racial composition of its general staff⁴² but it has previously participated in related discussions. For instance, in May 2021, Bruno Donat, Chief of the Geneva Office of the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), an entity within DPO, participated in an online event on Inclusion and Diversity and Racial Equity in Mine Action⁴³ during which he presented a series of charts containing demographic information about UNMAS's personnel based in New York and with at least five years of work experience – classified as "P3 and above" in the UN job levels.⁴⁴ The charts, presented in a debate on racial equity, focused on geographic regions.⁴⁵ While acknowledging the preliminary and non-comprehensive nature of the data, it demonstrated that, as of March 2021, only 19% of UNMAS staff covered in the sample were non-Western, 52% were from Europe and none from Sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition to geographic information, the gender composition of DPO's staff can be found in the UN Secretariat Gender Parity Dashboard and the CEB Human Resources Statistics. Disaggregated statistics on [gender parity in peacekeeping troops](#) are also available. This is consistent with DPO's growing gender-sensitive approach over the last couple of decades, including the creation

39 According to DESA's website, the last webinar of this series was held in September 2021.

40 Two of these webinars were: "COVID-19: Strengthening Science and Technology and Addressing Inequalities", held on 6 May 2020, and "Golden Years? Social Inequalities in Later Life", held on 24 June 2021. See at [UN DESA Webinar Series](#).

41 The monopoly goes back even further, with French men having held the position continuously since 1997.

42 The policy brief specifically refers to employees working for the DPO and not to UN peacekeepers, whom the DPO oversees but does not directly manage as staff.

43 The section's recording is available on the [UN Mine Action Service \(UNMAS\) YouTube Channel](#).

44 For more information on UN job levels, see [United Nations Staff Categories](#).

45 The regions were: Europe, Northern America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, Mena, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

of a [specific Unit dedicated to gender](#) aimed at elevating women's priorities "to peace and security decisions at all levels".⁴⁶

Given the sensitive and visible nature of its mandate, DPO produces a substantial amount of data, policies, strategies and guidelines orienting DPO's external work on the ground, while mechanisms addressing internal operations are scarcer and limited in scope. DPO's [Civil Affairs Handbook](#) states that civil affairs managers should, whenever possible, consider gender and diversity when building its teams, as well as during reporting and briefings. However, the language primarily focuses on gender issues and mentions vulnerable groups without specific attention to race. The [A4P+ Priorities for 2021-2023 document](#) outlines improvements in systems designed to manage the risks of misconduct, primarily focusing on sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as accountability for crimes against and committed by peacekeepers during field missions. However, it does not address personnel other than peacekeepers and does not specifically mention racism.

While DPO does have mechanisms for reporting misconduct, including harassment, exploitation and discrimination, such as the [Conduct and Discipline Teams \(CDTs\)](#) and Conduct and Discipline Focal Points, these are more focused on dealing with complaints from local populations against staff in field missions rather than addressing internal workplace issues.

While none of these specific mechanisms include explicit tools to address racism, DPO is subject to the wider UN [Office of Internal Oversight Services](#) (OIOS), which addresses complaints related to a wide range of wrongdoings and pays significant attention to DPO and DPPA due to the importance of peacekeeping missions to the UN's work. The only explicit mention of initiatives to address racism within DPO specifically appears in a June 2021 [news article published](#) by the UN. The article acknowledges UNMAS's efforts to enhance inclusion within the organisation,

referencing the aforementioned online event on racial equity in mine action and the existence of a DPPA-DPO Anti-Racism Action Group (ARAG).⁴⁷

The analysis of the DPO reveals significant gaps in both the racial diversity of its leadership and the internal mechanisms for addressing racial discrimination. The lack of comprehensive racial data within the department points to a transparency gap in diversity and inclusion actions. While recent initiatives by UNMAS suggest a growing awareness of racial equity issues in organisations within DPO, these efforts are still limited and insufficiently documented. Transparent reporting mechanisms and bolder racial equality commitments could help DPO address systemic racial inequalities and foster an inclusive organisational culture, ultimately enhancing its ability to develop racially-sensitive policies.

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND PEACEBUILDING AFFAIRS (DPPA)

In 2019, the former Department of Political Affairs (DPA) was merged with the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, becoming the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA).⁴⁸ Both DPPA and DPO work together in several UN Peace and Security efforts, which means that while having policies specific to each organisation, they often adopt similar or shared ethics and accountability mechanisms, such as the above-mentioned gender unit and the DPPA-DPO Anti-Racism Action Group. From 2007 to the present, DPPA (formerly DPA) has had three Under-Secretaries-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs: one woman and two men, all white US citizens. Ban Ki-moon appointed the two men, while António Guterres appointed the woman. This national and racial monopoly has persisted, with Guterres' appointment continuing at least 17 years of white leadership in DPPA. The Department does not publish data on the racial composition of its staff, regardless of job position, although

46 See Promoting [Women, Peace and Security](#) on the UN Peacekeeping Website

47 No additional documentation with further information about this group has been found in the public domain.

48 This analysis covers senior leaders from both the former DPA and DPPA.

information on gender, age and nationality is available through the UN Secretariat Gender Parity Dashboard, the RC Dashboard Survey and the CEB Human Resources Statistics.

There has been an increasing focus on discrimination-sensitive approaches in UN bodies and activities related to Peace and Security, particularly in gender-focused efforts, both internally and externally. These concerns can be traced back to the adoption of the [Security Council Resolution 1325](#) in 2000, which acknowledges the unique role and perspective of women as both victims and contributors to lasting peace and security. This rationale could similarly be applied to race and ethnicity, given their significance in conflict and peacebuilding contexts. However, despite recognising that race is a social marker that intersects with gender, there is a notable lack of data on frameworks, policies and mechanisms specifically targeting racial discrimination.

One specific mention of racism was found in the [“Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in Peace and Security, including Prevention”](#) Outcome Document, prepared following the Times of Crisis Pillar Summit of December 2022. This document reports on the three thematic discussions held at the Summit, which comprehensively mapped out the situation of minority rights in relation to UN Peace and Security efforts, including conflict prevention. However, despite the relevance of its thematic focus, it did not involve official participation from either the DPPA or the DPO. In addition, the Summit concentrated heavily on the impact of violent conflicts on minorities, with no discussion of internal UN mechanisms for combating discrimination.

The most explicit commitment to addressing racism internally and diversifying staff composition in the DPPA is outlined in its [2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#), which establishes the goal of creating “a stronger, more diverse and more effective department”, as well as the objective to build “a more collaborative, creative, diverse, inclusive and empowering work environment.” The document also refers

to DPPA’s aspiration to combat prejudice, discrimination and racism, promising to “improve its operational, administrative, management and recruitment practices and culture to enhance the effectiveness and diversity of its staff”.⁴⁹ However, the plan does not specify the mechanisms for ensuring this commitment is implemented.

In conclusion, in addition to failing to produce racially-sensitive data with regards to its staff composition, DPPA lacks specific mechanisms to assess progress in the department’s aspiration to increase its diversity and tackle racism in the workplace. This gap underscores the absence of visible, concrete anti-racist commitments, calling into question the organisation’s ability to uphold the goals, objectives and principles of its strategic plans.

OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS (OCHA)

Since 2007, OCHA has had five Under-Secretaries-General for Humanitarian Affairs: four British white men and one British Black woman. Two of the men were appointed during Ban Ki-moon’s tenure, one in his first term and the other in his second, while the other two were appointed during Guterres’ first term. The woman, appointed in 2010 by Ban Ki-moon, is a Black woman born in what is now the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, known as British Guiana at her birth. In addition to her British citizenship and academic background predominantly from British and American institutions, she was a minister of the British Government for ten years and is a member of the UK House of Lords. As such, her nomination marked a significant breakthrough in the gender and racial prevalence of white men in OCHA’s leadership. However, it did not disrupt the P5 monopoly, as British nationals continue to dominate the top position in the organisation. This research found no public dataset from OCHA regarding the racial identity of its staff across different hierarchical levels. Similar to several other UN entities referenced in this policy brief, OCHA is included in the UN general platforms: the UN Secretariat Gender Parity Dashboard, the CEB Human Resources

49 DPPA, [2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#), p. 26.

Statistics and the RC Dashboard Survey.

There are other tools, such as the [Duty of Care Framework](#), endorsed in 2019, that offer avenues for upholding principles of equity and non-discrimination within the organisation. The Framework outlines the minimum standards, roles and responsibilities for maintaining the safety, security, physical health and psychological well-being of OCHA managers and all personnel. While this framework does not specifically mention race or ethnicity, it encompasses a broader code of conduct for dealing with serious incidents, including different forms of discrimination. By establishing clear standards and responsibilities for promoting staff well-being and publishing a [final report](#) on conduct and discipline to ensure transparency regarding complaints and actions taken to address them, the framework fosters an environment that can be conducive to advancing other Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

In terms of its external operations, OCHA developed mechanisms such as the Multi Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA), which seeks to promote the rights and address challenges faced by marginalised groups within communities where OCHA operates. However, despite their aim to promote the overall safety and well-being of OCHA's personnel and the communities they operate in, neither the Duty of Care Framework nor the MSNA explicitly addresses racial discrimination or equity beyond the general ethical parameters set by the UN Secretariat, which OCHA, as an office rather than an autonomous agency, is subject to.

In contrast, OCHA's [Strategic Plan 2023-2026](#) includes an explicit goal to create an equitable and anti-racist leadership team, identifying “diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-racism in its workforce” as key enablers for core transformations within the office.⁵⁰ These are important steps forward, especially considering that this research did not identify clear references to anti-racism efforts in the workforce among most of the ten UN bodies analysed. However, the extent to which those

objectives will be put into practice remain unclear: IASC's Action Plan is aimed towards multiple member organisations, while the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan focused on OCHA's demands lacks specific mechanisms for implementing its DEI provisions. A transparent monitoring of OCHA's 2023-2026 strategy, along with the incorporation of racial considerations into the frameworks governing the entity's external operations, will be important to consistently enhance OCHA's ability to promote diversity and fight discrimination both internally and externally.

OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM (OCT)

The OCT was created in 2017 following [UNGA Resolution 71/291](#). Since then, its Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism has been a Russian white man, appointed during António Guterres' first term. While this single appointment is insufficient to establish a pattern, it reinforces the dominance of white male P5 nationals in leadership positions within UN bodies dedicated to peace and security. OCT does not publish data on staff racial composition, but disaggregated gender, national and related data can be found within the Gender Parity Dashboard and the CEB Human Resources Statistics.

While [OCT considers broader gender](#) and human rights aspects into its policy' planning, design, implementation and evaluation, this research was unable to identify any specific code of conduct, ethics guidelines or internal mechanisms to address instances of misconduct. The office's [Strategic Plan and Results Framework 2022-2025](#) reinforces its commitment to the [UN Values and Behaviours Framework](#), especially regarding the creation of a diverse, inclusive workplace free from discrimination. While these principles are important, similar to other entities analysed, the plan lacks specific details on addressing racial discrimination and does not indicate mechanisms for their concrete implementation.

It is important to note that OCT is a recently established UN body, which partly explains

⁵⁰ OCHA, Strategic Plan 2023-2026, 2023, p. 47.

the limited public information on its ethical standards and workplace policies. However, given the sensitive nature of counter-terrorism strategies and activities and the risks of reinforcing cultural, racial and ethical bias, the absence of internal mechanisms to promote diversity and prevent discrimination involving its staff and operations is problematic. To promote an effective and efficient counter-terrorism strategy that addresses its impacts on different social groups, including races and ethnicities, it is important that the OCT has clear and robust commitments and tools to improve diversity, tackle staff discrimination and prevent racially-related bias in its activities.

WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME (WFP)

From 2007 to 2024, WFP has had four Executive Directors (EDs), with one being Black and the other three being white. Ban Ki-moon appointed one white woman in his first term and one Black woman in his second term. António Guterres appointed two white EDs: a man in his first term and a woman in his second term.⁵¹ All of the appointees were from the US. While women have made up the majority of EDs in the past 17 years, racial and geographic imbalances prevailed at the highest WFP position during this period. Regarding overall staff composition, the research found no public data produced by WFP on the racial identity of its employees, regardless of their work level. In 2007, WFP's Executive Board (EB) launched a [Policy Issue](#) on the gender and geographical balance of WFP's international workforce, presenting the percentage of women and nationals from developing countries per job position for the 2002-2006 period. The EB also publishes [statistical reports on international professional staff and higher positions](#), which include data on gender and region of origin. While similar information can also be found in the UN Secretariat's databases and dashboards, the lack of disaggregated racial and ethnic data may

pose challenges to advancing effective DEI initiatives within the entity.

WFP has a robust system of ethical instruments regarding workplace conduct. Since 1975, the programme has had an [Office of the Inspector General \(OIG\)](#) responsible for conducting independent audits and investigations into suspected wrongdoing, as well as publishing [annual reports](#) that include data on discrimination. In 2008, WFP established its [Ethics Office](#), and its ethical parameters were later compiled in WFP's [2014 Code of Conduct](#). Despite not explicitly mentioning racial considerations, these are important instruments for the prevention and investigation of workplace misconduct and intolerance.

The most [recent reports of the WFP Ombudsman Office](#) provide desegregated data for discrimination and include recommendations for addressing racism inside the organisation. In collaboration with the Ombudsman and the Ethics Offices, the [WFP Workplace Culture \(WP\) Department](#) leads several programs and monitoring activities aimed at increasing workplace inclusiveness, supported by a dedicated DEI division. The scope of these initiatives expanded in 2018 with the issuance of circular [OED2018/007](#) by WFP's ED on "Protection From Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Abuse of Authority, and Discrimination".⁵² This document provides key definitions, such as practices considered abusive, as well as outlines responsibilities and instruments for dealing with reports of abusive conducts. Race is acknowledged in the document on several occasions, alongside other social markers, as a factor that can constitute a basis for different forms of discrimination.⁵³

Following the publication of the Executive Director's Circular, WFP established a joint Board/management working group (JWG) on harassment, sexual harassment, abuse

51 As mentioned in footnote 7, WFP ED is jointly nominated by the UNSG and FAO's Director-General. However, as the UN's chief administrator, the UNSG has a prominent role in the process.

52 This is backed by other circulars such as ED2020/022, Protection against Retaliation Policy (or Whistleblower Protection Policy), and OED2022/004, Prevention and Response to Abusive Conduct (Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Abuse of Authority and Discrimination). Different from OED 2018/007, however, their actual content is closed to the public.

53 [OED2018/007](#), p. 17, emphasis added.

of power and discrimination, a time-bound, ad hoc group jointly formed by the WFP's EB and management teams with the mission of reviewing and reporting to the EB about measures adopted to address these issues. One of the first measures taken by the JWG was to commission an independent, [External Review of Workplace Culture and Ethical Climate at WFP](#). This review was conducted in parallel with the 2018 edition of the WFP Global Staff Survey (GSS), an annual questionnaire directed to all staff members regarding the programme's standards of conduct.⁵⁴ With a significant participation rate of 85%, almost one in five respondents declared having either witnessed or experienced harassment. Concerningly, the review results stood "in stark contrast to the low number of harassment reports received by WFP in 2018".⁵⁵

The independent review also included several recommendations that were [later](#) endorsed by JWG, which advised the EB to review the WFP Code of Conduct in order to emphasise that compliance with the standards of conduct is mandatory. The EB later consolidated these recommendations into a broader document called "[Comprehensive Action Plan](#)" (CAP), which contributed to the [creation or improvement of initiatives](#) aimed at promoting inclusion and tackling discrimination in the workplace. In 2020, WFP Workplace and Culture and Development departments established an [inter-agency network on anti-racism](#), which has since organised several group discussions and virtual events on the matter. In December 2020, drawing from these discussions, the group presented the overall design of an anti-racism action plan, initially scheduled for implementation around the third quarter of 2021.⁵⁶ However, according to the most recent annual report of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services, released in May 2023, the plan is still "in its final stages of development".⁵⁷

These gradual advancements may have generated practical results. In the 2021 edition of the WFP Global Staff Survey, which had a participation rate of 84%, a significant majority of 76% of respondents indicated that they were either extremely or highly satisfied with WFP as a place to work. While this represents an improvement from previous years and was celebrated by WFP's Inspector General,⁵⁸ 8% of respondents [reportedly declared](#) they had experienced racism in the workplace, and another 12% said they had witnessed unfair treatment on racial grounds.

Despite enduring challenges, WFP stands out as one of the few agencies analysed in this policy brief which has developed mechanisms specifically designed to tackle racism and promote racial equality. On the other hand, additional efforts are required to ensure that more detailed racially-sensitive commitments and policies are effectively mainstreamed into the agency's guidelines, programmes and operations. Publishing an anti-racism action plan with measurable goals, targets and indicators to assess progress would be a significant step in this direction.

NON-MONOPOLISED BODIES

OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (OHCHR)

Since 2007, there have been four High Commissioners for Human Rights, with their identities being relatively balanced: two white leaders (one man and one woman) and two non-white leaders (one man and one woman). Ban Ki-moon appointed the two non-white High Commissioners: one South African woman with South Asian racial identity during his first term, and a Jordanian⁵⁹ man during his second term. Guterres, in contrast, appointed a Chilean

54 This research found no public sources disclosing the full results of the GSS. Some information on the survey's results is available only in secondary sources.

55 WFP and WTW, [External Review of Workplace Culture and Ethical Climate at World Food Programme: Final submission for Joint Executive Board/WFP Management Working Group on Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Abuse of Power and Discrimination](#), 2019, p. 4.

56 WFP [People Policy](#), 2021, p. 30.

57 WFP Executive Board, [annual report of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services](#), 2023, p. 16.

58 WFP Executive Board, [Note by the Executive Director on the annual report of the Inspector General](#), 2022, p. 5.

59 This High Commissioner has both European and Middle Eastern backgrounds but is identified primarily as Jordanian, with Asian, Muslim, and Arab backgrounds in UN press releases and profiles. Based on this information, the authors have categorised him as Jordanian and as belonging to the North African/Middle Eastern region in the hetero-identification process.

white woman and an Austrian white man in each of his terms.

The OHCHR serves as the principal entity within the UN system responsible for promoting and protecting human rights worldwide. Despite its focus on empowering and advocating for the rights of marginalised communities, OHCHR does not publish data on the racial composition of its staff. Information about gender and nationality can be found in the UN Secretariat Gender Parity Dashboard, the CEB Human Resources Statistics and the Resident Coordinators (RC) Dashboard Survey – but information about race and ethnicity is not disclosed.

The Geneva-based Human Rights Treaties Division of OHCHR provides support for the entities tasked with the implementation of international human rights treaties under the UN. One of these bodies is the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which oversees the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. As one of the oldest UN treaties, ICERD represents a landmark commitment to combating racial inequalities discrimination. The Convention is legally binding in the 177 UN member states that have ratified it but does not apply to the internal practices of the UN or the OHCHR itself.

Another important OHCHR-led initiative is the [Rabat Plan of Action](#). Adopted in 2012, the plan focuses on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Notably, the plan promotes adherence to international human rights law, balancing the need to prevent incitement to hatred with the respect for freedom of expression. In addition, in 2017 OHCHR introduced the [Faith for Rights framework](#), aimed at promoting the respect for religious plurality and diversity and preventing the use of religion to discriminate against individuals or groups. The OHCHR has also been at the forefront of initiatives, such as the [International Decade for People of African Descent](#) 2015-2024, designed to strengthen national, regional and international

efforts to combat racial discrimination and promote the full inclusion of people of African descent in society. The entity also developed a [fellowship programmes](#) offering human rights training and capacity-building for individuals from historically marginalised groups, such as people of African Descent, Indigenous Peoples and individuals from Least Developed Countries and Small Islands Developing States.

The 2022-2023 [Management Plan \(OMP\) for OHCHR](#) outlines various initiatives carried out by the office in member states, including visits by the Special Rapporteur on Racism. The document also specifies the expected results for its work designed to empower and prevent discrimination against People of African Descent in member states, which includes increasing their advocacy capacity and ability to exercise their right to participate in decision-making processes, as well as enhancing the effectiveness of national laws, policies and practices to combat discrimination. In terms of its internal affairs, the document establishes diversity and inclusion in the workplace, including the intersectionality of gender, race and other forms of diversity, as one of the ten priorities for OHCHR's Organisational Effectiveness Action Plans. As a result, the entity committed to identifying and addressing gaps, imbalances and barriers to recruiting and appointing a diverse workforce at all levels; cultivating an organisational culture that promotes safety, strengthens shared values and beliefs, and addresses harassment and discrimination; and introducing data collection and accountability measures to monitor progress against specific diversity and inclusion indicators.

While these commitments to promote diversity and inclusion are promising, this research was unable to determine the extent of progress in their implementation or the level of priority given to promoting racial diversity within these efforts. This demonstrates the need for more transparent mechanisms for monitoring DEI commitments and greater ambition in race-specific policies. For instance, programs providing permanent employment opportunities for beneficiaries of the fellowship program for people of African descent could be implemented.

UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP)

From 2007 to the present, the UNDP has had two Administrators, both white: a woman from New Zealand appointed during Ban Ki-moon's first term, and a man born in Brazil with German citizenship, nominated during Guterres' first term. Despite his Brazilian birth, his education and career have primarily been in Germany, the US, and the UK. The United Nations press office and internal HR systems identify him as German. Therefore, for this analysis, he is considered a white German man.⁶⁰ Despite a greater balance in terms of nationality and gender, the organisation's leadership has lacked racial diversity over the past 17 years.

Regarding overall staff composition, this research found no public data from UNDP on the racial identity of its employees, regardless of their level. Since 2021, the organisation has implemented an overarching monitoring process called the [Integrated Results and Resources Framework \(IRRF\)](#), which includes information on gender (referred to as sex) and geographic region⁶¹ of staff members.⁶² Additionally, UNDP is part of the UN Secretariat Gender Parity Dashboard, the RC Dashboard Survey, and the CEB Human Resources Statistics. Similarly to the other organisations analysed in this policy brief, it is possible to access gender disaggregated data but nothing on racial identity of UNDP employees.

In response to an information request⁶³ by the authors, UNDP confirmed that it currently does not collect data on racial representation within UNDP's leadership and personnel, stating that the entity is "part of ongoing discussions within the UN system, led by the UN Secretary-General's Anti-Racism Task Force, about the feasibility of collecting such data in

the future", and is committed to aligning with the UN system-wide decisions and actions on this matter. UNDP also affirmed that they are "including race and ethnic origin categories" in their regular employee surveys, conducted on a voluntary basis, "to gain a deeper understanding of personnel's experiences."

Since the mid-2000s UNDP has had an [Ethics Office](#) and an [accountability system](#) to promote integrity, accountability and transparency in the workplace.⁶⁴ In 2018, these efforts were complemented by a specific UNDP policy on [Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Discrimination, and Abuse of Authority](#), which establishes a clear prohibition on discrimination, including on racial grounds. In 2020, UNDP launched its [Code of Ethics](#), which includes specific guidance to "Encourage diversity" and "No discrimination", directly mentioning race and ethnicity in its non-discrimination policy. These parameters were further refined by the 2022 [UNDP Legal Framework for Addressing Non-Compliance with UN Standards of Conduct](#), which describes respect for diversity as one of the programme's core values. In 2021, [UNDP's Social and Environmental Standards \(SES\)](#) and the 2023 [SES toolkit](#) established requirements for preventing discriminatory practices against project workers, including discrimination based on one's race, ethnicity, sex, age, language, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, political opinion, among others. The implementation of these standards is monitored by the aforementioned IRRF.

In addition to the progress made at the policy and conceptual levels to address discrimination, UNDP adopted initiatives to promote diversity within the organisation. These include the [African Young Women Leaders \(AfYWL\) Fellowship Programme](#)

60 See the analysis of UNDP Global South/Global North representation in the Blue Smoke policy brief [Unveiling Inequalities](#).

61 The region's identification is geographically-based and does not refer ethnic origins. It includes the following categories: Asia and the Pacific, Africa, Arab States, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Headquarters. See [Integrated Results and Resources Framework \(IRRF\) Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#), p. 41.

62 See [Integrated Results and Resources Framework \(IRRF\) Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#), p. 41-42.

63 As mentioned in the introduction, information requests were sent to all ten entities analysed in this study. However, by the time of writing, only UNDP had responded.

64 UNDP [policy on Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Discrimination, and Abuse of Authority](#) advises that workers wanting to report prohibited conduct may first contact the [Office of the Ombudsman for the UN Funds and Programmes](#), formerly called Office of Joint Ombudsperson, an external UN body that covers informal dispute resolution to contract holders from UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women.

and the [People For 2030](#) Strategy for 2019-2021. While the latter establishes the goal of “strengthening the diversity of UNDP’s leadership pipeline,”⁶⁵ it does not explicitly address racial diversity. [The Phase 2 of the Strategy](#), covering the period of 2022 and 2024, on the other hand, acknowledges that “whilst significant gains have been made, gaps persist in areas of intersectionality such as race, ethnic and cultural diversity, sexual orientation, age, and socio-economic backgrounds”.⁶⁶ The document also refers to UNDP’s commitment to be “a proactive anti-racism organisation” and to build organisational capacity to track and report against DEI goals “by leveraging existing data collection platforms and introducing new DEI metrics”.⁶⁷ It also foresees the consolidation and further development of diversity-oriented recruitment programs.

The improvements between the different phases occurred in the context of efforts initiated in 2020, when the UNDP’s Administrator led a town hall meeting on racism following George Floyd’s assassination. This was followed by the establishment of a Corporate Anti-racism and Discrimination Team, which operates with the support of an Anti-Racism Advisory Group,⁶⁸ as well as a DEI Committee. The People for 2030: Phase 2 Progress Report notes significant progress in the implementation of Phase 2, notably the launch of a DEI Strategy in January 2023. This strategy includes the creation of anti-racism handbooks, a voluntary survey that introduced racial and ethnic categories, and a flagship initiative called “Speak Up Culture: Safe Space”, which comprises measures designed to enhance personnel participation in DEI efforts. These and other initiatives are portrayed in the UNDP’s website through a DEI section and a dedicated webpage focused on confronting racism and discrimination as impediments to development.⁶⁹

According to information provided to the authors by UNDP, the aforementioned flagship initiative is currently being piloted in 13 countries and includes reflection exercises and a Safe Space app through which personnel can anonymously share their experiences or contact the Ombuds office, Staff wellbeing team and DEI specialists to report bias or exclusion, including racism. Other examples of initiatives UNDP shared with the authors include: removing identifiers in certain recruitment tests; including supplier identifiers to increase minority and women owned vendors/suppliers; and working with other agencies and interagency bodies to advance anti-racism within the UN System, such as the UN Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. Finally, in July 2024, UNDP’s Senior Advisor on Anti-Racism [publicly announced](#) the submission of UNDP’s first ever Anti-Racism Action Plan to the Administrator for consideration by the organisation’s senior management.⁷⁰

In conclusion, since the 2000s, UNDP has taken important steps in establishing guidelines and code of conduct with clear prohibitions regarding discriminatory practices, including those based on race and other social markers such as gender and nationality. While these documents frequently acknowledge race as a basis for discrimination, they often lack specific objectives and measures for addressing racial discrimination or promoting racial diversity within UNDP. For instance, UNDP’s Code of Ethics refers to diversity as encompassing people from “different backgrounds and cultures” but does not specify which identities might be underrepresented or need to be promoted.⁷¹ Similarly, [UNDP Legal Framework for Addressing Non-Compliance with UN Standards of Conduct](#), which mentions diversity as a core value for UNDP, does not contain a single

65 Ibid., p. 10.

66 [People For 2030 – UNDP’s People Strategy](#) (Phase 2), 2022, p. 16, emphasis added.

67 Ibid., p. 26

68 See: Tiffany Moore, Moving the needle on racism inside UNDP, 2021; and the inputs received from UNDP on the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee questionnaire for the Committee drafting group on advancement of racial justice and equality

69 See UNDP’s [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) and [Race to the top](#) webpages.

70 At the time of writing, the authors were unable to confirm whether the plan has been approved by UNDP’s senior management team and/or when it is expected to be published.

71 UNDP [Code of Ethics](#), 2020, p. 24.

reference to racial considerations. Even guidelines and strategies that reference race are often vague to provide meaningful guidance on addressing instances of racial discrimination or tackling challenges faced by specific racial groups in a way that effectively promotes diversity. The publication of UNDP's Action Plan could help address these gaps. For it to be effective, the plan should include clear goals, targets, and indicators to track progress, as well as be accompanied by the necessary budgetary and practical tools to ensure its implementation.

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (UNEP)

Since 2007, UNEP has had three Executive Directors (EDs): a white man from Norway, a Black woman from Tanzania (in an acting capacity) and a white woman from Denmark. In terms of race, only white leaders were appointed by the UNSGs: the white man by Ban Ki-moon in his second term and the white woman by António Guterres in his first term. The Black woman was appointed in 2018 as UNEP's Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director. She assumed an acting position in this same year after the previous ED resigned due to financial controversies. Therefore, the only non-white leader UNEP had in 17 years was not chosen by the SG for this position, was never confirmed in post, and was replaced one year later by a white woman.

Regarding overall staff composition, this research found no public data produced by UNEP on the racial identity of its employees, at either higher or lower levels. UNEP is included in the Gender Parity Dashboard and the CEB Human Resources Statistics, which do not account for race or ethnicity. Regarding practical racially-sensitive mechanisms, UNEP relies on guidelines and principles to prevent discrimination and promote diversity. However, this research found that, similar to other departments and offices analysed, most of these instruments are directed at external actions within member states, rather than addressing internal staff diversity.

For instance, the Policy Guidance "[UNEP and Indigenous Peoples: A Partnership in Caring for the Environment](#)", issued in November

2012, sets out policies and procedures to incorporate Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and perspectives in the organisation's projects and programs. It refers to an [Indigenous Peoples Focal Point](#), a liaison officer tasked with assisting Indigenous Peoples and their organisations in working with UNEP, as well as preparing background materials in collaboration with relevant offices for UNEP senior staff to attend meetings that focus on Indigenous People issue, among other attributions.

These measures were later strengthened by the 2020 [UNEP Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework](#), a document guided by the 2030 agenda principles, including leaving no one behind, human rights and gender equality, sustainability and resilience and accountability. The framework incorporates a set of measures to respect and promote the rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as mitigate the potential impacts of UNEP-supported initiatives on their lives, lands and communities. While these mechanisms facilitate UNEP's engagement with Indigenous communities and organisations as partners, helping include their perspectives in project management and decision-making, they lack ambition. For instance, there are no measures to recruit Indigenous professionals in UNEP's staff or mechanisms to support and understand the challenges and experiences of Indigenous Peoples who might already be working within the organisation. Similarly, UNEP promotes initiatives such as the [Network of African Women Environmentalists \(NAWE\)](#), the [Young African Policy Fellows Program](#) and the [Young Talent Pipeline](#). While these programs aim to empower, build capacity, and enhance networking and professional opportunities for African and other non-WEOG countries, they lack a racial lens.

With regards to anti-discriminatory tools, UNEP's Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework outlines requirements to help prevent discrimination and promote equal opportunities in UNEP's workplace and recruitment, with a special focus on marginalised groups. In addition, UNEP's [policy on prohibited conduct](#), defines clear prohibitions on discrimination, including on account of race, and establishes procedures

and responsibilities to address instances of misconduct. Moreover, UNEP's [Conduct and Discipline annual reports](#) provide information on complaints involving allegations of wrongdoings against staff members and other personnel or entities, including implementing partners, along with details on measures taken to address them.⁷² UNEP's [Programme of Work and Budget for 2022-2023 \(POW\)](#) also states that the entity will "improve geographical distribution through outreach via regional forums and career development avenues."⁷³

While these mechanisms are important, they often lack specificity concerning racial issues. For instance, although UNEP's policy on prohibited conduct prohibits racial discrimination, the document does not clearly define what constitutes racial discrimination or offer detailed guidance on how to address complaints and protect potential victims of racism. In addition, the [Conduct and Discipline annual reports](#) are based on misconduct classification types that include assault, harassment, sexual exploitation and abuse, among others,⁷⁴ but do not explicitly refer to race. Moreover, the above-mentioned UNEP's Programme of Work and Budget refers to staff's geographical balance without incorporating a racial perspective. This demonstrates that, despite significant improvements, UNEP still needs to develop more robust policies to promote racial diversity and address the specific challenges associated with racial discrimination within the organisation.

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND (UNFPA)

UNFPA is the only organisation among the ten analysed that has not had a white leader in its top position in the last 17 years. The organisation has had two Executive Directors (EDs) in this period: one Nigerian Black man, appointed during Ban Ki-moon's first term, and one Panamanian Black woman, who was initially appointed as Acting Executive Director

after her predecessor's sudden death and was later confirmed as the permanent Executive Director during António Guterres' first term. The appointment of two consecutive Black leaders, with gender and geographic balance, stands in contrast to domination of white male leaders in most UN entities.

UNFPA is dedicated to tackling global population and reproductive health challenges while upholding human rights and promoting gender equality. This external mandate is reflected in its internal measures to address racial inequality. Notably, UNFPA is one of the few UN entities with a [dedicated webpage](#) on its DEI efforts. This page provides resources that highlight the organisation's commitment to diversity initiatives and its efforts to create a more inclusive approach to its projects. The DEI page includes a section specifically focused on [racial discrimination](#). It features a chart detailing personnel ethnic origins based on a self-reported survey from October 2023. The chart reveals that 30% identified as Sub-Saharan African or of African descent, 13% as Central and Latin American, 21% as Asian (including South and Southeast Asia), 9% as Middle Eastern and North African, and only 15% as from various regions in America and Europe.

UNFPA's approach represents a significant progress, especially when compared to the other organisations analysed in this policy brief. By collecting and publicly sharing disaggregated data on its website, UNFPA demonstrates a commitment to transparency and accountability. However, it is important to note that the chart categorises data by ethnicity rather than race. Another limitation to note is that only about half of the staff members (52%) participated in the self-reported survey, which could lead to underreporting of certain groups. Nevertheless, the ethnic categories used in the survey closely align with JIU's racial groupings, and the survey includes a wide range of job positions. The DEI Dimensions webpage also provides information on staff

⁷² UNEP reportedly developed an internal anti-racism taskforce, but details about this initiative have not been found in the public domain.

⁷³ UNEP, [Programme of Work and Budget for 2022-2023 \(POW\)](#), p. 35.

⁷⁴ UNEP Corporate Services Division, [Conduct and discipline Annual report \(2020-202\)](#), 2022, p. 2

gender, disability status, age, LGBTQIAP+ identity, and Indigenous or Native Peoples. Additionally, UNFPA is included in all three UN Secretariat databases and dashboards previously mentioned.

UNFPA has several internal mechanisms for upholding ethical standards among its staff. Under the Strategy, Policy and Standards Branch of its Programme Division, the organisation maintains a [Policies & Procedures Manual](#), described as a “live document” that includes regulations, rules, policies, and procedures applicable to all staff members. Among these, the policy on the [Prohibition of Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Abuse of Authority, and Discrimination](#) defines such behaviours as prohibited conduct and explicitly includes race and ethnic origin, along with other social markers, as grounds for discrimination and harassment. Additionally, UNFPA’s [policy on Personnel](#) underscores the importance of staff diversity, stating that the organisation “will accord consideration to gender balance and geographic representation in recruitment and staffing, as appropriate”, but does not acknowledge the need to promote racial diversity. UNFPA’s policy on Protection Against Retaliation is similar to those of other entities analysed in this policy brief. While it includes principles for workplace safety, it lacks specific details on protections against retaliation based on racial and ethnic grounds.

UNFPA’s DEI policies, on the other hand, incorporate specific measures to combat racism in the workplace, including “raising awareness of employee experiences; developing capacities amongst managers and staff through training and coaching on unconscious bias, inclusive leadership, enhancing our abilities to call in and call out discriminatory behaviour; and reviewing our policies and the effects of our practices to recognise and address systemic racism”.⁷⁵ In 2022, UNFPA launched a [Young Professionals from Africa and of African Descent programme](#),

offering one-year fixed-term positions at the P-2 level to qualified candidates under the age of 32 who self-identify as being of African descent or as nationals of African countries. The initiative’s last cohort was in 2022, and UNFPA’s [Strategic Plan \(2022-2025\)](#) does not mention any plans for renewal, though it recognises the intersectionality between race, class and gender and the need to ensure that everyone can “enjoy their rights and access opportunities free from discrimination, exclusion, and violence.”⁷⁶

Currently, UNFPA promotes the “I am Not A Single Story” initiative, an internal series of podcasts with staff members designed to celebrate diversity and recognise the barriers faced by UNFPA colleagues through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality is also emphasised in UNFPA’s [2024 Evaluation Policy](#), which acknowledges the interconnected nature of racial, gender, ethnicity, age, and other forms of discrimination. In conclusion, UNFPA distinguishes itself among the analysed organisations with its more specific internal approach to addressing racial discrimination and inequality. Unlike many other organisations, UNFPA not only has developed anti-racist measures but also provides a comprehensive and accessible overview of its staff’s ethnic composition, alongside a detailed description of its commitments to promoting racial equality in the workplace.

Nevertheless, the challenge remains to translate these commitments and principles into robust, organisation-wide policies. While UNFPA has made significant progress in addressing gender issues, the intersectional lens outlined in its DEI guidelines needs to be implemented through concrete actions. Key measures include reactivating and expanding practical policies to improve staff diversity, such as the recruitment program for individuals of African descent, and developing robust mechanisms to address the specific challenges associated with racial discrimination.

75 See “Racial discrimination - ‘Calling in’ the ‘Calling out’” in UNFPA [DEI Dimensions webpage](#).

76 UNFPA Executive Board and United Nations Office for Project Services, [The UNFPA strategic plan \(2022-2025\)](#), p. 5

Conclusion

The senior leadership of the United Nations lacks racial diversity. **From 2007 to the present, 31 individuals have been appointed by the UN Secretaries-General to occupy the highest posts of the ten agencies analysed in this policy brief. Of these, only a minority of 35% (11 professionals) were non-white**, including four Chinese men appointed as Under-Secretaries-General at DESA, an agency whose top position has been ringfenced by China.

Based on the JIU racial groupings, of the 11 non-white leaders, only five were Black or of African descent, four were East Asian (all from DESA), one was from North African/Middle Eastern, and one was of mixed origin. No Central Asian, South-east Asian, Hispanic, Latino/Latina/Latinx descent, or Indigenous professionals⁷⁷ have held the most senior positions in these ten organisations over the past 17 years. This inequality is compounded by gender imbalance, with white men making up over 45% of the appointments (14 professionals) and men in general, both white and non-white, constituting over 64% of the leadership (20 professionals).

In the past 17 years, only five non-white women have occupied senior positions in these key UN bodies,

and one of them assumed the role on an acting basis after her predecessor resigned, rather than being initially selected for the post by the Secretary-General.

Such asymmetries become even more apparent when examining individual entities. In some of the UN bodies studied in this policy brief, Secretaries-General have not appointed any non-white individuals to leadership positions in the past 17 years.

This is particularly noticeable in entities monopolised by the P5 countries. **Among the six monopolised bodies examined, four—DESA, DPO, DPPA, and OCT⁷⁸—have been led by only one racial group for the last 17 years. DPO, DPPA, and OCT have exclusively had white professionals in top leadership positions, while DESA has been exclusively led by East Asian men. Furthermore, DESA, DPO, and OCT have never had a woman in senior leadership roles.** OCHA and WFP are notable exceptions among monopolised entities, with each having appointed a Black woman to a senior position just once since 2007—at OCHA during Ban Ki-moon’s first term and at WFP during his second term.

These numbers demonstrate that ending national monopolies over top leadership positions may help foster greater racial diversity. Excluding DESA, **only two out of seven non-white leaders came from monopolised UN bodies.** This does not mean, however, that non-ringfencing entities will necessarily be more diverse. For example, **UNDP has never had a non-white Administrator in the past 17 years**, and the only non-white woman to serve as UNEP’s Executive Director was not nominated by the Secretary-General.⁷⁹ Therefore, while the national ringfencing of top positions in UN entities certainly reinforces racial inequalities, national diversity alone is insufficient to ensure improved racial representation within their leadership.

It is vital, therefore, to strengthen transparency, accountability and diversity as key pillars of appointments across the entire UN, from leadership to overall personnel. Top-down initiatives, such as Guterres’s recent anti-racist efforts, are important for raising awareness on racial inequalities, but they alone do not guarantee meaningful

⁷⁷ For definitions of these categories, please refer to the [JIU’s list of racial groupings](#).

⁷⁸ Please note that OCT was established in 2017 and, as of today, has only had one person occupying the top position within the organisation.

⁷⁹ Blue Smoke’s earlier report, *Unveiling Inequalities*, examined the gender and regional imbalances in these two programs’ leadership.

institutional change. During Guterres's two mandates, he made 15 of the 31 nominations analysed, with around 73% (11 nominations) being white professionals, most of them men. Ban Ki-moon made 16 nominations, only one more than Guterres, with 56% (nine nominations) of the individuals selected being white, also mostly men. In both Secretaries-General terms, white men composed the majority of appointments, but the increase in their predominance throughout Guterres's mandates shows a concerning perpetuation of unequal representation.

The findings of this research, while focused on ten organisations, reveal a broader pattern within the UN system: a large number of its

bodies have been predominantly led by white men for decades. Urgent measures are needed to align the UN's historical commitments to racial equality and nondiscrimination, as outlined in the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, with the organisation's internal operations, procedures, leadership and staff composition. Building a United Nations that genuinely reflects the diversity within its member states could play a crucial role in the urgent process of reinvigorating the legitimacy and re-establishing trust in the multilateral system. The following recommendations propose concrete actions to improve representation and anti-discrimination in the overall UN structure.

Recommendations

“We need to think: what kind of data should be collected, by who, and in order to do what?”

(Excerpt from interview)

The United Nations can do more to advance racial diversity and end racial discrimination within the organisation, better aligning the equality principles it advocates for member states with its internal practices, by adopting the following measures:

- 1. Collecting and transparently publishing UN-wide data disaggregated by race to facilitate regular assessments of the racial composition of its personnel at all job levels, including senior leadership positions.** To this end, UN bodies should incorporate racial categories into existing human resources databases, such as CEB statistics, and invest in new data sets. For example, a Racial Equality Dashboard, modelled after the Gender Parity Dashboard, could help develop UN racial metrics and concepts to match the standards of gender data, enabling more comprehensive intersectional analysis;
- 2. Developing racially sensitive UN-wide recruitment and promotion processes, along with dedicated paid internship, fellowship, and young professionals programs, designed to enhance racial diversity within the UN’s personnel at all levels.** Appointments and hiring processes should be transparent and rigorous, ensuring that leadership and staff are selected based on competencies and merits, while actively encouraging applications and progression from underrepresented racial groups. Specific measures should include establishing mandatory minimum percentages

for non-white applicants and interviewees during staff recruitment. UN-wide paid internship and fellowship programs focused on non-white professionals should include opportunities for progression into permanent positions within the organisation;

- 3. Mainstreaming racial considerations into all UN Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and anti-discrimination policies.** This involves revising the UN’s ethics, anti-discrimination, anti-retaliation, anti-harassment and DEI policies, as well as their respective guidelines, strategies and codes of conduct, to effectively incorporate race-specific considerations and their intersections with other social markers, such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, age and disability;
- 4. Mandating all UN entities to develop anti-racism plans with specific goals, targets, and implementation deadlines.** These plans should incorporate concrete tools for effective execution, including robust racial discrimination reporting and whistleblowing mechanisms, resources to protect and support victims of racism, and regular, race-sensitive training, courses, and awareness-raising activities for staff, as well as the provision of accessible informative materials such as handbooks. Additionally, the plans must detail the required budget for achieving the established goals and include regular, transparent progress reports based on clear indicators.

