

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

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## Human Rights

# 'Checkbox Diversity' Must Be Left Behind for DEI Efforts to Succeed

Good intentions to increase the diversity of organizations have led to “checkbox” approaches that don't account for hegemony, marginalization, and the creation of sustainable shifts in power. Without a closer examination of these practices, we may wake up in a few years wondering what went wrong.

By **Nicole Anand** | May 21, 2019



(Illustration by Aurélia Durand)

In the past few years, a race to the top regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in international civil society has brought about **energetic collaboration** and **discussion**. Popular DEI practices include a “**no manels**” pledge through which men honor a vow against participating in “all-male” conference panels, discussions of appointing women and people of color to boards of directors, and organizational strategies with goals of promoting

marginalized persons into leadership positions.

Yet growing **evidence** indicates that international civil society organizations are using stale and superficial approaches to diversity, leaving them ambling along without meaningful alterations toward improvement. This prompts questions about international civil society's understanding of diversity and the reasons for its absence. It also reminds us that solutions to systemic issues like racial inequity often tackle symptoms, such as demographic representation, and overlook deeply rooted causes, from institutional discrimination to cultural bias and transgenerational trauma.



### Breaking Through Barriers to Racial Equity

This series challenges current DEI ideas and practices with fresh perspectives on how to transform equity-driven work through an explicit focus on race and combating racism.



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Well-intentioned or not, international civil society's emerging models for DEI are no different than those of other sectors in the past. Marginalized persons have become just that—a marginal identity, a homogeneous “checkbox” that fits anyone at justice's outer edge, turning the mission of greater equity into a to-do that perpetuates the status quo of the mainstream machine.

This shallow checkbox-style interpretation of identity is formed from minimal data that assumes deep meaning about a person's way of thinking and acting. It **often manifests** as quick fixes to codifying a group or population and making sense of their beliefs and behaviors.

Diversity checkboxes have been used **time and time** again with both good and ill intentions, ranging from reducing inequality to driving even more marginalization. Yet even when the social sector employs checkboxes to increase representation of the underrepresented, it ultimately misses the point of deeply understanding differences for genuine, impactful collaboration. It also causes **unintended and lasting harm**, and ignites frustration and disappointment when a “diversity hire” ends up not working out, failures that get explained away in a number of ways that reveal the inadequacy of checkbox diversity. The staff member is called a “**bad fit**,” which really means unwilling to conform and threatening to existing cohesion. They're fired for failing to **meet expectations**—often code for failing to be a stereotype. Or the person willfully leaves the job due to the stress of dealing with one of the most commonly felt flaws of checkbox diversity: its prompting of questions about tokenism.

**Tokenism** is the act of making surface-level tweaks to issues of marginalization that are performative and lack in veritable efforts to reduce inequality. In a global sector focused on social change, organizations select people of color to be at the top or in marketing positions to make teams look good, literally, to funders and peers who want to see them as socially conscious and aware of the prerequisites for success in a diverse world. This leaves people of color in a vulnerable position, wondering if they have their job because of their talent and skills or if they are being used as window dressing.

In this way, tokenism is harmful. As illustrated through “**camouflaging techniques**,” there can be repercussions on two levels. First, on an individual level, a state of vulnerability can increase self-doubt and lower the confidence it takes to ask questions and contribute new ideas. Second, on a structural level, when organizations implement superficial diversity policies and actions, it delays substantive processes for sustainable change by diverting attention to small changes made and convincing audiences that it is progress.

Camouflaging won't encourage and enable analysis of issues from different angles. It also will interfere with organizations taking an important step in effective DEI efforts: internally embracing the rich variety of problem-solving approaches that arises from people's complex and unique lived experiences.

As it stands now, many international civil society organizations manage their own internal processes according to Western theories, even if some external projects get different treatment due to widespread knowledge about the problems with **large-scale neo-colonial practices in international development**. The team members have to bend themselves to these Western standards regardless of their different ideologies, epistemologies and expertise—attributes that develop from their individual interactions with the world and its reflections back on them.

Two examples of practices biased toward Western norms are those that promote so-called *efficiency*, such as linear project management for complex problem-solving, and others that emphasize *productivity*, including transactional and remote meetings for relationship building and partnerships. When diverse hires' non-Westernized ways of organizing, communicating, or collaborating collide with these Western-endorsed manners of working, manager and staff member come into conflict and both begin trying to part ways.

Hiring for diversity and then managing for assimilation does not breed innovation. At best, it stifles creativity. At worst, it forces others to absorb what Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall refer to as "**our own sense of what good looks like.**"

For organizations to succeed at DEI, they must internally embrace people's different approaches to problem-solving that are shaped by their unique lived experience. It will take patient participatory practice, including a genuine desire to lower egos, listen attentively, and understand what marginalization—beyond the stereotype—means. It will entail combatting entrenched mindsets and behaviors that have led to poor understandings of hegemony and marginalization. It will require instituting the rights for creating sustainable shifts in power.

But how? These three tactics are a start to guide the work of dismantling inequitable systems rather than chipping away at the periphery of the problem:

**Embrace the complexity of diversity.** If the goal is innovation, then the approach must be to recognize different perspectives and ways of working. Everyone has a unique lived experience that shapes the way they manage projects, collaborate in teams, create social programs, and advocate for causes. Define

diversity as a mix of people's intricate and evolving ways of learning to navigate decision-making, not as a simple combination of reductive classifications.

**Design a process that works for marginalized persons, not only the organization.** The checkbox approach allows organizations to reach tangible goals when it comes to recruitment and promotion of people of color. However, this approach does not measure the costs to the person of color or the field of practice when, for example, hires don't last, or people of color and non-Western staff are expected and taught to assimilate (even unconsciously). Consider designing a multi-step process that first makes the job application process accessible to people of color. Also focus the hiring process on illuminating and celebrating their assets, such as those related to learning styles, communication capabilities, resilience, and determination. Finally, encourage a sense of belonging by taking an interest in how they think through problems and making decisions to then mainstream those practices.

If you're having trouble knowing where to start, look to the theories and practices that challenge systemic issues and offer tactics to shift narratives and interactions. **Decolonising Design** is a group of scholars focused on rearranging power dynamics sowed through colonialism. They support academics and designers from the Global South experiencing and trying to dismantle neocolonial practice. Networks like this one can help to imagine a different type of system and design an organizational process in line with it.

**Understand that the “challenge” is exactly what is desirable.** Diversity in approaches to problem-solving means those who are doing it differently may be perceived as **disruptive rebels** for having an alternative path to improving social issues. But these “disruptors” may prioritize other values or practices because a distinctive constellation of factors guide their instincts and decisions. The goal is not assimilation but collaboration for expanded thinking and unconventional action.

## Celebrate People, Not Boxes

It is challenging to confront the harm that our own biases can cause. Often we defend these biases because they help us make sense of the world and move forward. Other times we blindly believe that our biases are helpful and not harmful. Historically marginalized people have been **lauded as an integral part of accelerating innovation**. However, if we peek beneath the surface to unpack the biases that underpin the way these achievements were measured, we may not like what we see—the celebration may be of a “box” rather than the real human placed in it.



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