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Belief, practice, emotion: diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) at Busara

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About Busara

Busara is a research and advisory organization, working with researchers and organizations to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation. Busara pursues a future where global human development activities respond to people's lived experience; value knowledge generated in the context it is applied; and promote culturally appropriate and inclusive practices. To accomplish this, we practice and promote behavioral science in ways that center and value the perspectives of respondents; expand the practice of research where it is applied; and build networks, processes, and tools that increase the competence of practitioners and researchers.

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About Busara Groundwork

Busara Groundwork lays the groundwork for future research and program design. As think pieces, they examine the current state of knowledge and what is needed to advance it, frame important issues with a behavioral perspective, or put forward background information on a specific context.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

DEI Diversity, Equity and Inclusion



Introduction

When we counted, the number that came out was 47.

47 languages were spoken by the staff of Busara who had gathered in Nairobi to celebrate our annual research festival Tara Mistari in September 2023 for the third time. We probably even missed quite a few, such is the nature of hybrid events and not everyone attending. The different languages listed were spoken within national borders and across a huge amount of locations all over the world. The 47 languages affirm our identity as an international Global South organization.

They also, however, are a symbol of the challenges we face. Being an international Global South organizations sounds like an easy description. Yet, the words are loaded: what does that mean—to be an international Global South organization? How does that definition shape how we act, how we think about personnel policies, how we engage in international issues, how we maintain our focus on the Global South, or how we build and accommodate a workforce that comes with such different perspectives?¹

One guard rail that we use is to think about diversity, equity and inclusion and how we make these meaningful, actionable buzz words. This short framing document sets out these guard rails in the shape of three pillars (belief, practice, emotion) and three ways of making these become real (building, doing and learning).² We see this as the starting point for an internal and external conversation that allows us to continue to refine our thinking, transparently share our learning and record our practices.

1 These are not rhetorical questions: we are slowly making our way through grappling with them in more detail, for example in Aden (2023) and Aden, Ngugi and Schomerus (2023)

2 The longer document that forms the basis for this summary is Ngugi and Schomerus (forthcoming 2024)

How do we think about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)?

Drawing on the many different definitions that exist, this is the definition that works for us:

Diversity practices difference. This includes difference in identity categories (such as gender, age, background), but stretches beyond such categories. Nobody is alone in who they are, even if they do not want to align with others who seem similar, with diversity creating the freedom to be an individual within a category. Diversity means to openly connect with each other.

Equity facilitates fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people. It means that one's identity cannot predict the outcome of one's pursuits. Wellbeing and growth through equitable access to opportunities of all staff makes Busara sustainable, stable, and resilient.

Inclusion means that a variety of people participate; and that their participation means they have a voice and power to make decisions about their work. DEI work does not have a finish line: it is a constantly evolving process of refining beliefs, sharpening practice, and acknowledging emotion.



Why focus on DEI?

Being a value-driven and resilient organization means that all people who work at Busara are protected with their differences. Living our DEI principles also helps us to do the core of our work better: it enables us to ethically produce knowledge that is context relevant, supports operational decisions for those implementing programmes and policies, and makes a contribution towards a more equitable world. Research becomes context specific when it highlights difference.

DEI creates better working relationships in the organization, improves knowledge creation, and supports our pursuit of global equity, addressing injustices of the past that continue to shape the presence.

Our ambition

As an international Global South organization working in a time of realisation on how past unfairness and inequality continue today and thus need to be addressed, we are aiming to achieve a working environment in which even in pressured moments we elevate (rather than minimise) difference as a way to nurture each other. This requires us to increase our staff diversity based on identity, background, education, discipline, thinking and perspective.³

Busara allows variation in voices, viewpoints and ways to communicate. These are expressed in our engagement in the relevant conversations. This also means that we practice inclusion by doing justice to the time and emotional labour that research respondents shared with us.⁴

³ Aden, Ngugi and Schomerus (2023)

⁴ Wambua, Owsley and Wein (2023)

The pillars of belief, practice, emotion

DEI requires that we look at ourselves with creativity and honesty to admit challenges freely, address them without judgement, check whether our beliefs are unclear, address emotions, and then start again. We articulate, exercise, and protect, our approach to DEI in three stages:

Belief: We express belief through our principles, acting in the interest of the people in our community, and a deep commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. We need to continuously question our beliefs, as they can guide us. Yet beliefs alone will not make us a diverse, equitable and inclusive organisation.

Practice: We make our beliefs come alive through practice that shows in policies, processes, norms, our research methods, our client approaches, creativity and honesty that avoids jargon. Our practice allows us to be bold in our recommendations. Practice means acknowledging that DEI is not intuitive, but requires tying a tight knot between beliefs, resources, and every day actions.

Emotion: Whether we feel positive, negative or neutral about DEI can significantly affect our behavior and decisions. Emotions can stand in the way of practice through disappointment or pushback, at times making organizations less courageous in practicing their beliefs. Yet, sharing a purpose is not easy while structural inequities and systematic discrimination continue. How we, as an organisation, respond to this emotiveness generally and individually is part of our identity. How can we acknowledge the emotional labour it takes to be a DEI organization?

Making it real: building, doing and learning

We aim to make DEI real through a continuous loop of building (our beliefs and practices), doing (meaning that our practice can be seen and felt), and learning (including learning about the emotional impact that DEI work can have). Below is a brief list of commitments of how we have been doing this and what we seek to put in place in 2024.

Building: what we have put (or are putting) into place from 2023 - 2024

Building belief

- *We have developed a strategic DEI framework that articulates inequities and embeds our challenges in the global learning. What you are reading here is the summary version.*⁵
- *Building on articulating our challenges in having equitable pay across genders, we will refine our gender inclusivity framework.*⁶
- *We will continue to work on establishing credible progress measures (meaning that how performance is assessed takes diversity into account).*
- *We will continue to name (and publish) our challenges to allow us to talk about them internally and engage in conversations externally.*

⁵ Ngugi and Schomerus (forthcoming 2024)
⁶ Singh and Ngugi (2023)



Building practice

- We will refine our practice by actioning insights from the Busara DEI working group on practices of hiring and management practices (such as defining, building and rewarding performance).
- We will apply a DEI lens on defining and measuring performance, goal setting, motivating staff, salary structures, promotions, opportunities for learning and exposure, people and project management.
- We will incorporate DEI in all our policy documents.
- We will establish a DEI function to tap into a broader range of perspectives, experiences, and talents.

Building emotion

- We will establish what a brave space needs to look like for Busara so that we can allow emotions to play out.⁷
- We will engage staff in articulating that DEI work is historically loaded and emotionally challenging, for example when men are invited to learn about how Busara seeks to address the gender pay gap.
- We will seek to find a language that expresses that different backgrounds create different perspectives on the world.
- We will purposely establish channels for discontent communications.

⁷ Ali (2017)

Doing: implementing and testing the practices that we are seeking to establish

Doing belief

We will develop a shared vocabulary that expresses our values (for example by shifting our language use from referring to ‘international and local’ to ‘national and non-national’).

Doing practice

We will test policies such as promotions, hiring and insurance policies.

Doing emotion

- *We will emphasise listening to share the burden of responsibility between the listener and the speaker;*
- *We will generate organizational conversations around how people in Busara experience DEI.*

Learning: record, reflect, and use our lessons

Learning belief

- *During team meetings and individual conversations, we will gain clarity on concerns about DEI;*
- *At Tara Mistari (Busara’s annual research festival), we will continue to frame sessions around DEI and power;*



- We will offer regular spaces for learning and debate as part of our work culture (for example in lunch and learns or our organisation-wide playful gathering Baraza).

Learning practice

- We will assess the performance of researchers in diverse ways.
- We will record reflections on initiatives in ways that can be easily accessed, for example through the Busara Publication Series Groundwork.
- We will record a dictionary of Busara language to be included in the Staff Handbook;
- We will establish diverse, equitable and inclusive DEI metrics for a new key performance indicators (KPI) review.

Learning emotion

- We will name the emotional impact of DEI;
- We will recognize when emotional responses are useful or not useful for DEI initiatives (because acknowledging emotions does not mean to always elicit them).

Beware of DEI traps

DEI work can be performative.⁸ A long history shows that bureaucratizing DEI can allow it to become formulaic or to continue the very same patterns of exclusion that it seeks to address. Performance can swiftly happen at the belief level: organisations can easily express beliefs without practice follow up, and without learning from what works. Virtue signalling is too easy to do since putting out positive statements is easy. And there is empty DEI, which are actions that look good for the DEI framework, but are meaningless to the people they aimed to support.

In addition, we do not work in isolation: we work with a diverse set of partners, some of whom might not always share exactly our approach to DEI. How we engage with each other without losing sight of our values will be a challenge we need to collectively and collaboratively embrace.

That is why for Busara the pillars of belief, practice and emotion are crucial: we think it is difficult to be solely performative at the levels of practice and emotion. If we delve into how we talk about our beliefs, how we practice them and how we feel about them (and the necessary changes they suggest), we hope to get to the bottom of how we profoundly change how within an international Global South organization we work with each other, with the people whose time we request for our research, with the partner organization who seek our input and with others across the globe who are seeking to define new parameters for working internationally from and in the Global South.



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