



Voice4Change England think piece

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A transformative Black and Minority Ethnic voluntary and community sector for a Big inclusive Society



A national voice for the Black and Minority Ethnic voluntary and community sector



Foreword

The BME voluntary and community sector (VCS) can be credited with many of the qualities needed to develop the Big Society. It is innovative with limited resources; it shapes its services around the needs of communities; and it mobilises communities to work together to improve their lives. Yet despite this, much of the Sector is struggling to survive. The current fiscal environment has of course, had an inevitable impact. But this struggle goes beyond the funding cuts we are currently seeing.

For some time there has been a challenge to the rationale and validity of groups organising on the basis of race and ethnic identity. Despite demonstrable and ongoing race inequalities, organisations have found it hard to communicate their value to policymakers, funders and the wider VCS. BME voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) have struggled to locate themselves in policies around community cohesion, single equalities, multiculturalism and the push to rationalise services.

In 2010 Voice4Change England published *A shared vision for the future of the BME VCS*. This was our attempt to bring together a collective vision for the future of the Sector. It was informed by over 100 BME VCOs and in-depth interviews with leaders and practitioners in the BME VCS. One of our recommendations to BME VCOs was that we needed to collaborate to develop a shared narrative on race equality. This narrative should communicate the effects of persisting inequalities, and whilst recognising diversity, should bring out commonalities and a wider view of equality.

We hope that this thought provoking paper by our first Voice4Change England Fellow, Sanjiv Lingayah will start the debate on what a shared narrative on race equality should look like. This paper and Sanjiv's current PhD study that informs it, aim to open up a new understanding about policy discussions on race equality. They strive to inform efforts by policymakers and the BME VCS to create a new kind of discourse – one that recognises both the need for equality and justice and the need for solidarity across society. I welcome Sanjiv's paper as an important contribution and stimulus to these discussions.



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About this paper

The purpose of this paper is to encourage thinking and action within Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) voluntary and community¹ organisations (VCOs) at this transitional moment. I argue that, for BME VCOs to be transformative social forces in the time of the Big Society, they need

to give renewed meaning to the idea of BME as a unifying identity; build a sense of shared purpose with other BME VCOs; and to explicitly locate work for greater race equality² in a broader project of building a society that is progressive, diverse and characterised by solidarity.

About Voice4Change England

Voice4Change England is a national support organisation for the Black and Minority Ethnic voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (BME VCS). We are a leading voice in public policy to inform and influence practice that has a direct affect on the development, delivery and impact of BME voluntary and community organisations (VCOs). We support the sector to build its capacity and secure resources to meet the needs of vulnerable and excluded communities.

By engaging and consulting with a wide range of organisations at the national, regional and local level, we provide an informed, authentic voice which shapes policy and decision making. We also connect and develop BME VCOs so organisations can influence policy in their own right.

“Our mission at Voice4Change England is to ensure public policy meets the needs of BME communities by valuing and supporting BME VCOs to challenge inequality and strengthen civil society.”

¹ I am mindful that there are valid questions about whether or not there is a single BME VCS. Whilst this is certainly a valid debate, I do not have space in this paper to explore this issue in depth.

² I also recognise that many BME voluntary and community organisations do not work directly on race equality though I would argue that race inequality indirectly frames the work of many such organisations.

1 Introduction

BME VCOs are in transition. Like most of the VCS they will be subject to funding cuts. The work of BME VCOs may be particularly vulnerable as grants for representation and campaigning functions decrease³ and delivery of public services becomes the funding lifeblood of organisations. At the same time there is another, perhaps greater question mark hanging over BME VCOs: Does the concept of 'BME' remain meaningful? An argument against the enduring relevance of 'BME' is the growing prevalence of fluid and hybrid identities that cross traditional colour lines. This may mean that BME and non-BME is no longer a useful way to demarcate society.⁴ In addition, it can be argued that BME identity and 'identity politics' encourages 'small camps' and works against bringing all people together, unlike concepts such as the 'Big Society' and 'Britishness' favoured by policymakers which at least attempt overall unity.

I agree that identities are shifting and that there is a need to build collectivity that can operate across society – though not in ways currently advocated by policymakers. But I also believe that BME VCOs have made and continue to make a positive contribution to British society as a whole. In this paper I want to suggest that to continue as a meaningful force for social change BME VCOs must adapt to changing circumstances.

BME VCOs need to demonstrate a sophisticated notion of identity affiliation and politics and to (re-)articulate race equality and anti-discrimination as a society-wide project. In other words the sector needs to refute the perception amongst mainstream policymakers that organising along BME identity lines contributes to separatism and anti-collectivism. The BME sector must explicitly locate its work in the aim of enabling a bigger, better and inclusive society.

In the next section of the paper I will briefly cover some aspects of the history of BME organising in Britain as a reminder of this legacy and also of the ongoing challenges that such organising presents. I then turn to some of the features of the contemporary operating environment for BME VCOs and the emphasis on nation and collectivity. Finally, I address the need for a renewed spirit of co-operation amongst BME VCOs and draw attention to some of the major issues that need attention if such organisations are to have a constructive role in moulding the 'Big Society'.

³ See for example the changes to the Office for Civil Society's strategic partners programme.

⁴ For example there is an English dialect called Multicultural London English spoken by people across a range of races and ethnicities. It is also colloquially known as 'Jafaican' – a kind of 'fake' Jamaican patois.

2

A snapshot of BME organising

There is a long history of BME presence in Britain (Fryer 1984, Visram 2001). BME people have acted collectively to provide self-help; to act in political resistance and struggle; and to work for greater (race) equality. There are useful and interesting accounts of organised responses of BME people to racism from the 1950s and before (see for example Gilroy 1987, Shukra 1998, Sivanandan 1982). I only have time to take a snapshot view of the period from the 1950s onwards.

Early BME organising was a response to the state and state racism within Britain as well as part of the struggle for independence in the 'colonies'. In the 1950s and 1960s the state homogenised people of African, Caribbean and South Asian heritage into the category of 'coloured Commonwealth immigrants' (Shukra 1998, p. 50). One by-product of this was that although these immigrant communities recognised themselves as different they were brought together by common experiences of discrimination. As a result, by the 1960s it made sense to undertake co-ordinated cross-community responses to racism and to build a notion of political 'Blackness'.

Through the 1970s and the early 1980s, many Asian, African and Caribbean groups organised, mobilised and resisted racial disadvantage and discrimination under the banner of 'Black'. However, this idea was also problematic. Though it was intended to be a political concept it also had pigmented undertones and definitional difficulties.

For example, Stuart Hall amongst others has expressed concerns about the silencing of Asian experiences and agendas within the Black narrative (Modood 1992a; Hall 2000b). In addition the coherence of 'Black' was undermined as Asians, Africans and Caribbeans experienced different kinds of structural positioning, disadvantage and socio-economic trajectories. As the state began to view and treat 'coloured Commonwealth immigrants' differently 'Black' solidarities weakened. In the mid-eighties and nineties cultural difference and multiculturalism became increasingly important to BME VCOs – in some cases this was driven by community pride and in others it was a means to access funding for particular ethnocultural groups.

Some authors have written powerfully about the problem of replacing an imperfect but potentially unifying idea such as 'Blackness' with multi-culture. For example, Kundnani (2002) criticises a type of gatekeeping community 'leadership' encouraged by multiculturalism and Alexander (2006) has argued that hyper-interest in cultural identity may have served to distract from the need for equality. Before returning to the need for and nature of BME solidarities I shall briefly review some of the recent New Labour and Big Society developments that profoundly influence the present and future realities of BME organising as much as the legacy issues described above.

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From New Labour to the Big Society

There was a major political backlash in the early part of the New Labour period towards ethnic differentiation and policies of multiculturalism. Disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001, 9/11 and the London bombings were all taken as indications that diversity and unity in Britain were becoming substitutes not complements. The response in policy discourse has been to emphasise the need for community cohesion and 'Britishness' as an antidote to multiculturalism that had gone too far.

In such a political environment policymakers view BME organising with suspicion. BME VCOs that seek to advance the cause of BME people and communities, e.g. by campaigning on racism or the need for more funding, are seen as fragmentary, particularist and engaging in a form of 'special pleading'. However, by contrast BME groups and organisations with explicit objectives to build 'Britishness' – particularly amongst Muslims – become extremely attractive to funders and government.

This political shift continues into the Con-Lib coalition Government. The Big Society, rather than Britishness, is the preferred 'unifying' concept now and it is backed by the repeated mantra that 'we are all in this together'. It remains to be seen whether the Big Society is big enough to prioritise race equality and to provide space for BME VCOs to play a constructive role. In the next section I argue that such a role should be possible, but that this will require some hard questions for and creative answers from BME VCOs.

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A purposeful agenda for change

The history of BME organising highlights the need to make meaningful connections amongst BME people, communities and VCOs. I argue that the contemporary political climate also requires a radical re-positioning of BME VCO activity towards an inclusive and common benefit – not because it is pragmatic to gain support from policymakers and funders but because it is the progressive thing to do. I address three inter-linked areas that require attention below.

“...one task for BME VCOs is to build a sense of ‘BME-ness’ or to find alternative language capable of bringing diverse people into alliance for (race) equality...”

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A. The meaning of BME

The definition of BME encompasses everyone that that does not identify as ‘White British’. This encompasses a huge range of people from the ‘not-quite-white’, e.g. the Irish or Polish, to people of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage. BME is a constructed banner that has little inherent meaning. It is a broad category but does not necessarily have depth. Therefore one task for BME VCOs is to build a sense of ‘BME-ness’ or to find alternative language capable of bringing diverse people into alliance for (race) equality. In the United States ‘people of colour’ has been used to attempt this alliance and the concept of the ‘Rainbow Nation’ has been employed in South Africa. Each of these choices is interesting but has their own problems. For instance, what counts as colour and should pigmentation matter?

Whatever is the appropriate language (and it could be BME or some variant) it is important to allow for the dynamic and complex nature of identities described above. The principle must be one of porous identities rather than ring-fencing and it may be that the ‘correct’ language emphasises processes of ‘othering’ and structural disadvantage that affects non-White and White people.

B. A meaningful BME VCS

The idea of a BME voluntary and community sector is contingent on the idea of BME being a meaningful category of identification. It also depends on BME VCOs identifying with others that might also be considered to be part of the Sector. Historically, VCOs have been defined as BME VCOs because of the race and ethnicity of their leadership and target beneficiaries rather than because of shared social analyses, interventions, objectives or vision. As a result this leads to a broad Sector but not necessarily a deep one.

I believe that there is a need to connect and build BME VCOs as a more unified and coherent social movement that has strong grassroots support and meaningful engagement with policymakers. Of course, this requires setting aside some historic organisational rivalries and adopting common positions and a shared sense of the future. There has already been some of this collective spirit in evidence recently, e.g. 2010 saw Voice4Change England's 'Shared Vision' document (Voice4Change England 2010) and the collaborative development of a 'Black Manifesto' (Equanomics UK 2010).

C. From the particular to the general

Whilst more Sector and movement building work is necessary, it is not sufficient. There has to be more. The most important element in ensuring transformative BME VCOs is to explicitly locate their work, for example promotion of race equality, in the present and larger struggle for the Big and inclusive Society.

The strength of the BME VCS – identity-based roots and focus – is also its weakness. It has been easy in the current political climate to sideline BME VCOs as particularist and quick to play the 'race card'. As an illustration some aspects of this critique can be seen in the October 2010 issue of Prospect Magazine entitled 'Rethinking Race'.

However, enlightened BME VCS work has never been nor should it be a zero sum project that takes from society as a whole to benefit particular groups. Instead it has and should contribute to benefits for all. Yet, for reasons to do with shortages of resources and, in some cases, overly-narrow thinking, BME VCOs have not been actively engaged in discourses about how their activities are part of an agenda about collective benefit for society as a whole. This vacuum has been filled by policy and public discourse that characterises BME organising as a problem. This discursive gap needs to be filled urgently if transformative BME VCOs are to be part of the landscape of the Big Society.

Conclusion

So what does all of this mean in practical terms?

I think that it means some careful thinking and hard questions about the meaning, value and nuance of BME as an identity. This means recognising the potential for this identity to be porous. It will also require the recognition that people may not think of themselves in these terms and that affinity in modern Britain moves across race and ethnicities in ways that defy easy definition. I think it means some open and constructive talking amongst leaders of BME VCOs: What is the nature of solidarity across organisations; how can they be at one more often; what are the shared objectives that matter; and what alliances are needed within and without the Sector to bring about progressive social change for all? Such conversations will also enable BME VCOs to state and demonstrate the value of the BME VCS for BME people and beyond.

BME VCOs have been active in their modern form for over 50 years in Britain – and through that period they have secured progress and enriched society as a whole. Addressing some of the issues above will, I believe, help to secure a meaningful and transformative future for BME VCOs in a bigger, better and more inclusive society.

“...BME VCOs have been active in their modern form for over 50 years in Britain – and through that period they have secured progress and enriched society as a whole...

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Voice4Change England Fellowship

The Voice4Change England Fellowship was launched in October 2009, at our national conference on 'Race and Recession'. The first Fellowship has been awarded to Sanjiv Lingayah – author of this publication – to support his PhD on contemporary discourses of British and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) identities. The PhD is examining how ideas of diversity and national unity have been developed in the New Labour period and beyond. In particular it examines how policymakers and voluntary and community sector discourses depict the nature of and relationship between BME and British identities and how this in turn affects policies, programmes and priorities on race equality, BME communities and voluntary and community organisations (VCOs).

About the author



Sanjiv Lingayah is currently working on a PhD on evolving contemporary discourses of British and BME identities. He is based in the Sociology Department at the London School of Economics and is supervised by Dr. Claire Alexander. He has worked for over a decade on social policy and social justice issues. He is a former Research Fellow at London Metropolitan University's Centre for Social and Evaluation Research and also a former senior staffer at the new economics foundation (nef) – a leading progressive think tank.

His particular interests and specialisms include enabling public participation in social issues; strategic advice for and

evaluation of voluntary and community social action; race, ethnicity and BME social action.

Sanjiv has worked with Voice4Change England over the last four years supporting the development of and progress towards its strategic objectives. Sanjiv is the first recipient of the Voice4Change England Fellowship to support knowledge development that strengthens the BME voluntary and community sector.

Acknowledgements from the author

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Disclaimer

The author and Voice4Change England have made significant efforts to ensure the accuracy of the contents of this paper. The views expressed in this paper belong to the author and are not necessarily shared by Voice4Change England.

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