DEMOS

report

Change Within

The role of black and minority ethnic community organisations

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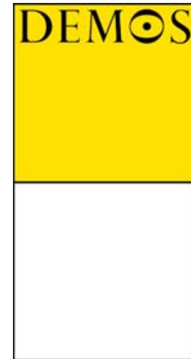
Contents



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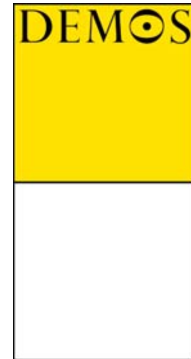

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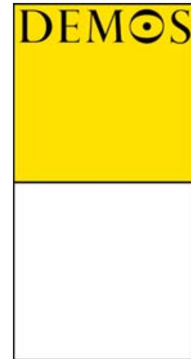


1. Introduction

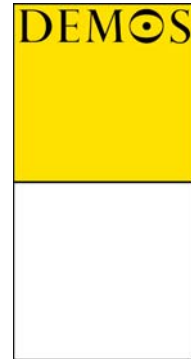
Unconvinced by the success of the UK's attempts at multiculturalism – the idea that a number of different cultures can co-exist alongside one another simultaneously without undermining the overarching values of the society of which they are a part – many commentators have argued for a range of different options to change the ways in which minority and majority communities interact in Britain. Some say that future policy should stay away from actively supporting institutions that affirm cultures of origin, instead focusing on the common ground between diverse communities. Others argue that we should go much further, for example prohibiting certain cultural and religious forms of dress within public institutions. Increasingly, the debate is polarised around abstract concepts that have little bearing on the lives of people at the sharp end of the dilemma.

Change Within takes this debate out of the theoretical domain by exploring the group of organisations that stand between individuals and the large-scale institutions that struggle to engage with specific needs of different communities. Community groups that attend to the needs of particular faith or minority ethnic groups or apply themselves to addressing the needs of recently arrived refugees are on the frontline of trying to negotiate the practical realities of life as a minority community in the UK.

Change Within will clarify how these groups can be part of the answer to the questions the UK faces at the moment. Addressing fears about making an increasingly diverse society function effectively is dependent on articulating an identity based on equality and shared interactions between different groups. Community groups based in minority communities help specific groups of people express and affirm their identity and, from that foundation, reach beyond their own communities into a wider sphere. Rather than viewing them with scepticism or doubt, then, these groups must be part of the wider framework of public services and government, without losing the independence in which much of their credibility rests.

All bad news?

In the last five years there have been a number of signs of breakdown in the relations between minority communities and the wider UK population. In 2000 and 2001, towns in the north west of England encountered the sharp end of deteriorating community relations with race riots breaking out in a number of different areas. More recently, we have seen the BNP elected as the official opposition in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. But these are only the last in a series of indications that things were starting to go wrong.



In fact, since the late 1990s the rhetoric around immigration has been less and less welcoming, with xenophobic responses to asylum seekers coming from the Balkans and parts of Africa undermining the most fundamental principles of offering refuge to those fleeing persecution.[1] These views found their way into the political mainstream, with both Conservative and Labour getting progressively 'tougher' on immigration issues.

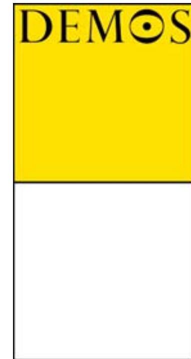
But at the same time, aspects of the UK's response suggest that the divisive forces are at least partially counterbalanced by other trends. There have been strong rebuttals of anti-immigration policy, with organisations like the Refugee Council articulating a different take on the value of immigration. Compared with much of continental Europe, the presence of overly racist or xenophobic political rhetoric is relatively limited and the political successes of the BNP are still restricted to the local level. At the same, public events that celebrate a pluralist society continue to receive support – such as the Love Music, Hate Racism festival which now happens in both London and Leeds. Public responses to campaigns such as Make Poverty History and Stop the War indicate that it is not only communities living in diaspora who are feeling more connected to a global community.

The government's reaction to increasing tension has been to build a community cohesion agenda, centred on the idea of the need for bridge-building to happen between the two communities, with attention also paid to the economic and social disadvantage experienced by people living in the locality. Central to this has been the idea of integration – the sense that communities should mix with one another more until the boundaries between them become blurred and the battle lines for disputes eventually disappear. Rather than the two communities co-existing alongside one another, there should be a greater expectation that they would interact.

This represented the early markers of a change in approach. In some areas, multiculturalism seemed to have failed. Allowing communities to preserve aspects of their own identities and traditions was understood to have led to each group becoming increasingly entrenched in its own ways of life, developing discrete services and businesses to serve their own needs. Eventually, the rift became so great that violence between neighbours could break out.

Increasingly, the policy agenda implies a choice. We can support minority communities in our midst, providing services tailored to their needs and accept that these groups may remain isolated from the broader context in which they live. Or we can 'enforce' integration, which means paying less attention to the different starting points from which people enter the public realm and which requires a degree of conformity for people prior to engagement. For many minority communities this enforced integration sounds alarmingly as if people are demanding assimilation to white British norms.

Change Within explains why the distinction between these two approaches is a false one. For mixed neighbourhoods to work well, individuals first need to understand and be secure in their own community. This need not imply a total acceptance of



every aspect of their community's way of life, nor need it imply being insulated against other cultures with which people are living. Integration, not assimilation, should be the goal of policy that aims to reach out to minority communities and the majority white populations who are resisting their presence. This sort of integration requires a secure foundation; for many black and minority ethnic groups, that foundation must be rooted in a community with whom they share ethnic and cultural origins. There should be a focus on the civic infrastructure of black and minority ethnic communities not only because respecting people's choices about how they want to live their lives is the right thing to do, but also because it represents the only way in which real, meaningful cohesion can be achieved.

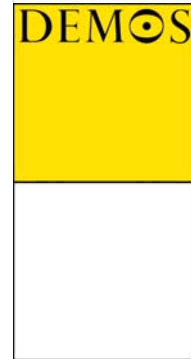
Integration and inclusion

With all attention diverted to the debate on integration and cohesion, it is easy to forget that the main reason policy-makers and politicians know that some black and minority ethnic communities are not thriving is because of basic social and economic indicators. For many of the worst-off communities in the UK, the cycle of poverty remains an inescapable trap. Intergenerational unemployment, poor education performance and low aspirations combine to create a situation in which hopes of progress can seem futile. Efforts to tackle the cultural and social barriers to building successful minority ethnic communities will be effective only if they also attend to the crippling economic conditions in which many groups live. Poverty can dominate all efforts to overcome isolation or conflict, in both minority ethnic and majority white communities. For community groups, addressing social and economic inclusion sits alongside focusing on issues specific to their own community. Their capacity to tackle the two in relation to one another gives them a vital role in transforming the communities of which they are a part.

Working with the grain

Inclusion and cohesion are as much about being confident in the unique aspects of one's own culture and background as they are about finding things in common with the wider community in which one lives. When people first come to the UK, it is important that they have the opportunity to build up links within communities with whom they share an ethnic or faith identity. Making these links is a normal and essential part of building a new life in an unfamiliar place.

East London offers a particularly stark example of the ways that immigrant communities arrive and settle within a particular area of a town or city, motivated by the desire to stay close to members of their ethnic and faith communities in a foreign country. From the Jews settling close to the garment trade in the nineteenth century, through to the arrival of the Bengali community there in the 1970s, the area has consistently acted as a first home to communities newly settling in the UK.[2] The history of the East End also reveals another vital lesson about the nature



of minority communities. There is a consistent pattern of behaviour that many new groups follow, with earlier generations concentrating on passing on the values of originating cultures and faiths, and later generations working out the ways in which competing identities can be blended successfully to make life work in a different setting.

For many of the UK's black and minority ethnic groups, this transition has been complicated by higher levels of racism, as well as postcolonial politics that affects the ways in which immigrants from Commonwealth countries are perceived. But the picture of diversity in the UK is an increasingly complex one, with some minority groups outperforming majority white children in schools, for instance. A simplified picture in which membership of a minority group equates to experiencing poverty, and belonging to a majority white community signifies greater wealth, is a dangerous misconception.

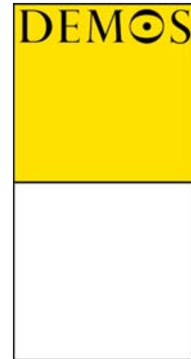
Solidarity between all the different groups experiencing race discrimination is essential for campaigning purposes, but it is vital that policy-makers and practitioners do not fall into the trap of treating all minority groups in the same way. The idea of 'super-diversity' – that divergent experiences between and within different minority communities demand a much more sophisticated response from politicians and society as a whole – is essential if the UK is to move on from the division and inequality that affects some minority groups.

But lessons from the past still suggest that certain patterns are typical of groups in diaspora, and whatever the successes or failures of a policy of multiculturalism, interventions to support these communities will be effective only if they move with the grain of the existing forms that communities take, rather than opposing behaviour that is already in place.

What we mean by community

New descriptions of community need to take into account that people's self-defined community may be far less rooted in geographical considerations and may include people sharing faith, ethnic or workplace ties. For some black and minority ethnic communities, relatively lower levels of social mobility have resulted in the emergence of geographically bound communities of different backgrounds centring on particular places. This is not true across the board, however, and for the purposes of this report it is vital that we take a sufficiently broad reading of community to allow the experiences of more dispersed black and minority ethnic groups to be brought to bear.

Equally, the differences between minority communities means that this report looks at a cross-section of different types of organisation. For the purposes of this research, 'black and minority ethnic community groups' was understood to refer to groups which specifically took as their remit assisting one, or several, minority groups. Most of the organisations that worked with more than one minority



community were concerned with refugees and asylum seekers, focusing attention on the common issues shared by people in that position.

Findings from the research

The report highlights five key sorts of organisation operating with black and minority ethnic communities:

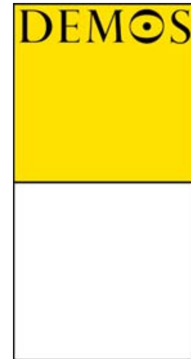
- *Fixers*: helping to hold families and communities together during difficult times
- *Catalysts*: supporting community members in achieving personal goals
- *Brokers*: taking an active role in bridging the gap between the community and other institutions
- *Advocates*: supporting individual users in addressing issues with authority
- *Campaigners*: drawing attention to and lobbying on areas of importance for their own or a coalition of communities.

Research found that there were certain critical strengths that underpinned effective work in all these organisations:

- merging formal and informal modes of communicating and engaging
- providing familiarity at difficult times
- connecting the experiences of the individual with the needs of the collective
- boosting participation in more formal political and civil arenas
- supporting change and transitions within black and minority ethnic communities.

There are a number of pressures operating on black and minority ethnic community organisations at the moment:

- engaging with government and local authorities, while retaining ownership of the overarching purpose and focus of the group
- finding effective strategies for engaging with central and local government
- providing good quality services while continuing to be a ‘real’ community initiative
- being co-opted into local authority politics, making real dialogue difficult to initiate
- managing funding relationships and generating bids for new resources
- inaccurate labelling, which does not correlate with the reality of how people describe themselves

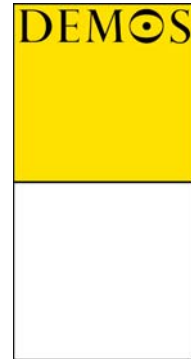


- dealing with regulation and operating in a formal legal context
- ensuring good governance of the organisation.

The interactions between different pressures create a situation where there is a strong case for change. These organisations hold the key to tackling some of the most persistent inequalities within the UK, but they often rely on non-governmental sources of funding, which are under increasing pressure. Relationships between statutory bodies and community groups are often complicated by 'buffer' organisations that administer (but also consume) resources and dilute the quality of the relationship between authorities and grassroots organisations. Politicians and policy-makers need to work on improving the quality of their relationships with these groups in order to reduce social exclusion among some minority groups, to amplify the voices of community members to better understand their overall position and to build the capacity that meets the community's needs, rather than needs identified from a remote perspective.

Four clear principles emerge from this analysis, each of which leads to a series of possible practical responses:

1. Allow communities to tell outsiders about what they need, rather than use interventions to weave their real-life experiences into a discussion rooted in Westminster politics.
2. Government should play a key role in tackling issues relating to black and minority ethnic infrastructure, but cannot achieve change alone.
3. Develop the tools to tackle ambiguity, rather than assume that complex issues will be decisively resolved.
4. Avoid abdicating responsibility for promoting the well-being of black and minority ethnic communities to extraneous factors over which we have little control, such as the passing of time.



2. Strengthening the bonds: why black and minority community organisations matter

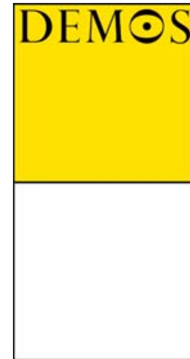
Community organisations are important in minority communities because they allow people to build and maintain good relationships with members of their own ethnic or faith group. Quantifying the value of different sorts of relationship that exist between people is extremely difficult. The relationship between employer and employee is defined in monetary terms, with additional value added with benefits such as pensions and holiday time. But in less formal settings, the equivalent value can be hard to measure. Social capital theory suggests that there is a separate sort of value that comes from the informal social relationships that exist between people. It argues that as a result of these social relationships, people are able to access support at difficult times, as well as take steps to change the aspects of their lives that they want to be different.[3]

Theories about the ways in which communities build up social capital emphasise the importance of 'bonding' capital as a precursor to more outward-looking relationships. 'Bonding' capital describes the nature of the relationship between extended family and neighbours living close to one another. It characterises the links that exist between people who have many things in common. After building these 'bonded' relationships, most people go on to develop other sorts of social capital. Bridging capital describes the relationships that people build with individuals and communities different from themselves, often in response to a shared problem or goal. From there, people go on to access the more formal routes into power and influence, engaging with local and national institutions, and so on.

But crucially, most people will engage with people unlike them only when they have thriving relationships with people who are similar to them. Bonding relationships can be between family members and close friends. For black and minority ethnic communities these will often be members of the same ethnic or faith group as themselves. Equally, applying the model at a community level suggests the need for groups to feel secure in their own identity within a wider operating context before they are able to move outside what is familiar and engage with more diverse cross-sections of people.

The same but different: community organisations and bonding

Community organisations are important because they create the opportunity for people to build constructive bonding relationships with people whose background they share. Social capital need not always be a positive force – the semi-kinship relationships between gangs, for instance, represent a profoundly negative realisation of bonding social capital – and community organisations offer a much



better chance of converting the need to build close relationships with similar individuals into something with constructive consequences.

This is especially important for minority communities, and not only because the likelihood of experiencing higher socioeconomic disadvantage also lays them open to additional threats of fractured community relations and negative social capital. Black and minority ethnic community groups can also fulfil two other vital roles for the groups they serve:

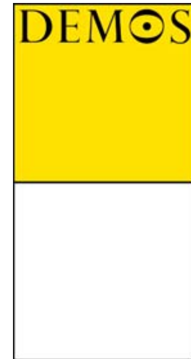
1. For people who are still negotiating the ways in which they manage living in a foreign, or partially foreign culture, it provides a 'safe' space for addressing some of the dilemmas that arise, as well as dealing with the consequences if and when things go wrong.
2. Equally, it can help to build collective resilience in the face of discrimination by giving members of the community a strong sense of their own identity and respect for their origins in defiance of prejudice experienced outside their community.

At the moment, for instance, members of the Muslim community are experiencing an increase in suspicion and discrimination as a result of their faith. Because of the rise in violent extremism among a minority of Muslim men, many young Muslims are viewed with a scepticism or mistrust that was previously on the wane. Dealing with that change in the public perception of their faith and position in UK society is possible only with the support of others in the same position. Being able to talk to someone who can empathise with your situation, as opposed to merely sympathise with it, is central to developing the tools to resist the negative messages that such behaviour sends without being driven towards complete disillusionment. As one community worker told us:

> *There is a specific agenda around young Muslims; there is no point in pretending that there aren't issues that are particular to that group of people.*

What do organisations really do?

The work of the community organisations researched for *Change Within* covered a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from those which eased people's everyday life experiences, through to those that were focused towards the formal political process. These fell into five broad types, each of which were important to individuals and communities at different times. Many organisations fell into two or more of these categories, but when this was the case, there were usually different people undertaking the work as distinct strands. The 1990 Trust's database of black and minority voluntary sector organisations provides numerous examples of each sort of organisation.[4] Equally, some organisations operated in more than one category.



The Fixers

Fixing organisations were the familiar faces at difficult times, as well as being the glue that helped to hold family life together in challenging circumstances. With people often approaching them in an ad hoc fashion during critical periods, these organisations were adept at dealing with people under stress. In practical terms, their language skills and knowledge of people's cultural backgrounds often gave them the edge in coping with specific problems, but there were also other social ties, which meant that individuals working within these groups were perceived to have a certain informal role within their communities, regardless of the organisations of which they were a part. Other tasks performed by this sort of organisation included the provision of funeral services, basic immigration and benefits guidance and setting up and managing food cooperatives.

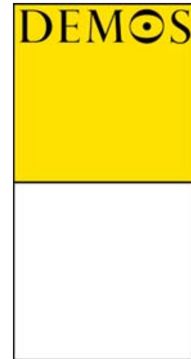
For example, a woman came to one organisation for help after her daughter was raped at school, afraid of how the attack would be perceived by the men in the community and certain of getting a sympathetic response from the staff, whom she already knew. The worker was able to help the woman get medical and police attention for the girl without attracting unwanted attention from other community members. Although she was frustrated by the attitudes that led to the need for these measures, the worker understood enough of the family's background to understand that it was vital to respect their wishes in order to get the victim the help she needed.

The stated purpose of these organisations is often connected to advice, or general community support. Many provide low-level training opportunities as well. Most of these organisations were extremely small, dealing with delineated geographical areas and therefore, arising in areas where there were high concentrations of members of a particular group. They did not tend to have major capital resources behind them and were often based primarily in small offices, with activities taking place in borrowed spaces.

In north London, for instance, the Indo–Pakistan Cultural Centre offers advice on education, housing, benefits and immigration issues. This is combined with social events, such as a lunch club once a week and special trips, with home visits possible for community members who are not able to leave home. Shakti Women's Aid offers information, counselling, support and temporary places to stay for women from black and minority ethnic groups who are experiencing domestic violence in Scotland.

The Catalysts

Catalyst organisations were involved with helping community members to achieve their personal goals. In many instances, this meant offering training to people keen to work or engage more outside their community. For others, it meant ensuring access to health services or social care, either through direct service provision



(which tended to be culturally specific), or through enabling access to services provided by statutory providers or other, specialist voluntary organisations. These organisations were also active in equipping community members with an understanding of their origins, through religious education, mother tongue teaching and arranging celebrations of significant events or festivals.

One organisation, for instance, was active in offering training and support to community members in their local area. They taught English as a second language, and offered basic IT training, as well as opportunities for people to gain entry-level qualifications that would enable them to move on to courses provided at the local further education college. Another organisation offered elderly care provision that was provided by members of the elderly person's own community, which was particularly important in cases where the person had dementia.

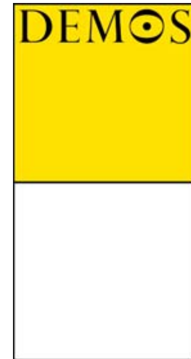
These organisations often had a larger scope, but were usually still local or regional in character. In some cases, they had grown out of fixer organisations that had decided to increase their capacity to meet specific needs. The East London Mosque, for instance, offers a range of activities designed to support members of the local community in achieving their goals. Some of these activities are focused on faith and spiritual life – such as Evening Madrassah and the Saturday Islamic School – but there are also activities centred on health and family and community life, such as the Rihla Drugs Project and Muslim Community Radio.

Similarly, in Bristol, Amana Education Trust is a voluntary organisation that aims to raise the attainment of Somali young people. The organisation combines a supplementary school, parents' forum and youth group, all of which work in partnership to try and ensure that the young people achieve their potential both socially and economically.

The Brokers

Many organisations acted much more obviously in the 'bridging' role envisaged in the social capital scale of involvement. These organisations eased their users' relationships with other groups and with institutions and services that lay outside the boundaries of their own community. They tended to ease transactions with local public services, or to signpost people to services or other organisations when they were unsure of where to go for help. In some cases, they would take people along to appointments to ease their first steps into challenging environments. Into this category also fell the many organisations engaging in capacity-building work; in other words, equipping others to undertake the sort of work done by community organisations and to develop effective strategies for getting support from decision-makers. These organisations were also involved in bringing knowledge and expertise into the community from outside.

The Islamic Foundation, for instance, is currently hosting a national programme to equip Muslim women to take part in interfaith initiatives. The course enables women to discuss their reservations or anxieties about taking part in this sort of



work, as well as providing concrete training opportunities that will give people a greater understanding of the skills they might use in that setting. Another organisation produces a local paper, which discusses issues of global and national importance that affect the community, as well as highlighting local issues.

Organisations engaged in the work varied in size, although those providing formal training opportunities tended to be slightly larger. They also tended to be less wedded to specific local areas. The Black Training and Enterprise Group, for instance, acts as a linking and capacity-building organisation, creating opportunities for 'black groups and individuals to play an active role in the economic regeneration of local communities through partnership with others'.

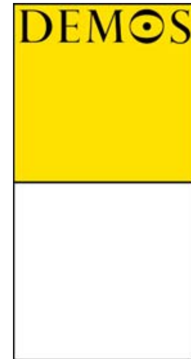
The Sheffield Somali Community Association also reaches out to other services on behalf of their service users, aiming to improve the conditions of the Somali community across the board. They combine this with social activities and provide training programmes, spanning a cross-section of needs within their community.

The Advocates

Many organisations combined an advice-giving role with advocacy for individual users on particular issues. Generally, this involved negotiating with local officials or service deliverers on areas where users were struggling, in relation to housing, immigration or benefits, for example. There were also examples of organisations taking part in advocacy for collective priorities, such as providing transport access to religious buildings. Advocacy tended to take the form of support at face-to-face meetings (for example, at MPs' constituency surgeries), as well as letter-writing and help with formal complaint procedures.

In one case, an organisation working alongside a number of refugee communities was frequently involved in renegotiating housing arrangements, and ensuring that their clients got a fair deal on the points system that determined priority levels for rehousing. Another organisation acted for women who were in difficult domestic circumstances, sometimes helping them to negotiate within their own families to address the problems that they were having with a range of issues. Another represented schools offering Islamic education, articulating their views on a range of national issues connected to learning and public services.

These organisations varied in size. Some were national in coverage, but there were still a number of organisations that acted at a local or a regional level doing this sort of work. In London, for instance, Westminster Befriend A Family links volunteers with families who then support the family in dealing with legal and bureaucratic demands on them. The Leeds Racial Harassment Project similarly aims to tackle specific cases where members of minority groups experience discrimination, as well as providing broader services that also tackle racism.



The Campaigners

Other organisations were actively involved in campaigning activities, confronting a range of different issues at a national and local level. For some, the emphasis was on addressing a range of specific or local issues that particularly affected their own community, although these were not necessarily issues that were connected specifically to ethnicity or faith. Others were working on raising the profile of a cross-section of issues, trying to promote the need to address race or faith issues more generally within a given locality.

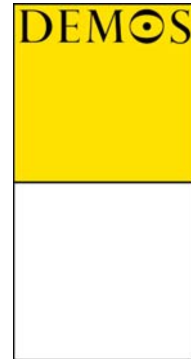
A local organisation campaigning against racism had found their remit broadening as the more overt forms of discrimination became less pressing. It diversified into campaigns that promoted the strength that came from the diversity of the area. Another campaigning organisation was deeply involved in changing local service provision for minority communities. It had developed a range of different activities, all of which were eventually focused towards improving local services, as well as improving the mechanisms through which people could engage with Westminster and Whitehall.

Community campaigning organisations are often a confederation of a number of groups already working on issues in an area, or draw on existing networks to create a bedrock of support for their agenda. Leeds Race Equality Council campaigns within Leeds local authority to ensure that race issues are high on the agenda. Operation Black Vote campaigns nationally within the UK to encourage members of minority groups to vote, and to increase their visibility within the political realm.

For some people, campaigning and advocacy sit so closely as to be indistinguishable from one another. It is helpful to see them as separate functions, however, as there are organisations that do one and not the other. Equally, the campaigning that some advocacy groups do is through the prosecution of individual casework which, while a wholly legitimate approach to campaigning work, differs substantively from more traditional campaigning models. Obviously, many groups will operate within both organisational categories.

There were certain critical strengths that underpinned effective work across the spectrum of organisations:

- merging the formal and the informal
- familiarity at difficult times
- the individual and the collective
- boosting formal participation
- supporting transitions within black and minority ethnic communities.



Merging the formal and the informal

Because they are deeply rooted in their communities, groups are able to merge traditional training and services delivery activities with their role as the point of contact for informal mutual support. Empathy with the community often helped to guarantee the credibility and success of an organisation from early in its development. One community worker said:

> *We were based in a Portakabin at first and when it was time to move we wanted to pick somewhere carefully. In the end we chose a disused pub where there was a murder and lots of drug-related crime. We ended up turning a negative community asset into a positive one.*

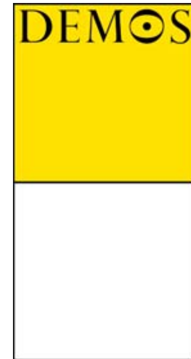
Likewise, another group explained how it had been founded in response to a community meeting. All the members of their community had come together to try and tackle the problems of communication that seemed to be emerging between the generations, and a small group was set up to tackle difficulties facing young people as a result. Eventually, this grew into a much larger advice service, but its roots in an informal community discussion remained an important cornerstone of its local support. These relationships are also critical to the strength of organisations themselves, with a bedrock of community support also acting as an essential foundation for their work. 'Our community roots are definitely important,' one organisation said. Another woman explained:

> *Being part of a close-knit community has been our strength. I was aware of the need in the area, because I grew up here . . . most of them knew me around here.*

Connections with the communities also meant that, for some organisations, they were able to offer real opportunities for integration. Addressing the breakdown in relationships between black and minority ethnic groups and majority white communities in the UK means that we can no longer be complacent about the extent to which integration is something that we can expect to happen 'naturally'. But for efforts to integrate communities to work, they must be rooted plausibly in each of the host communities, and the individuals involved must have an authentic reason for coming together. By operating in the grey area between formal and informal activity, community organisations are often better placed to deliver 'real' mixed activities that chime with the existing priorities and preferences of their users.

In the case of services for older people, for example, one worker explained:

> *At this stage in life, people from all the different communities we serve become more insular. By offering services that can be culturally specific, but are provided at the same centre, we're giving people a chance to connect to services that meet their needs while remaining a part of the wider community, in which the majority of them have lived more than half of their adult lives. We have seen levels of prejudice fall at the centre, and that's because people are brought together in an authentic way.*



Likewise, one centre explained that although they had started off delivering education and training services specifically to the Muslim communities, non-Muslim locals now came in to use their services because of the quality of their provision. As a result, good informal relationships were emerging between the students, not because of heavy-handed interventions that forced mixing between groups, but because of the pragmatic concerns that actually represent some of the most significant areas of common ground between local residents.

For some organisations, the blend between formal and informal takes the form of a particular relationship between people in leadership roles. One woman told the story of her organisation's progress from a women's group, designed to meet the needs of women experiencing difficulties with migration, to a major regional voluntary organisation providing services to people of all backgrounds across their locality. The impetus for starting up came from a woman seen as 'the neighbourhood aunt' – the woman to whom many already went with their problems or worries. But as the group began to grow, her colleague was brought in to deal with the challenges posed by authority – for the original founder, contact with authority was intimidating and overwhelming, and drew her away from the community work in which she excelled. The success they eventually experienced was connected to the relationship between the two directors, which allowed the organisation to grow without losing sight of its original purpose.

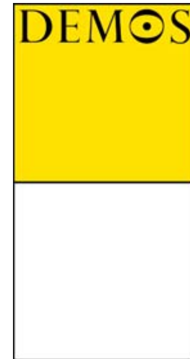
Familiarity at difficult times

There are critical points in most people's lives when they need something already known to them, rather than something different or challenging. At times when life is already extremely stressful – during serious illness, after having a baby or during a major move, for instance – it is important to be surrounded by familiar things not only for the 'bonding' reasons outlined above, but also because being surrounded with relatively familiar norms gives people the best chance of stabilising themselves and moving on positively with their lives.

One centre director was quite clear about the advantage that his services were able to offer: 'They are culturally sensitive, and therefore less intimidating.' Another highlighted the extent to which small things could make a crucial difference to people during times of sickness, or family stress. She explained:

> *When our workers go in, if they go shopping for the family, they know what to buy. When we provide personal care for elderly people, we can do the proper, ritual ablutions at the time of bathing.*

For example, achieving mental health objectives for young Muslim people is a religious and a cultural issue; all these things play out within the mental health agenda and it is not realistic to detach mental health outcomes from those cultural considerations. This understanding underpinned what one group highlighted as being a very effective relationship with the Department of Health. Perhaps uniquely – because mental health is one of a small number of areas in which the relationship



between individual identity and culture is so intimately connected to securing improvement and recovery among patients – it is slightly easier to gain recognition for the role that culturally or religiously specific organisations can play.

Equally, older people were more likely to have language barriers that made accessing additional support difficult and, because they were often from outside the UK, they found it easier to accept help from people with similar backgrounds. One organisation providing extensive care services for elderly people emphasised the importance of language and cultural values in providing good quality care, both for the Asian community in which they had begun their service, and now for the white service users who had also come to form part of their client group. The founder explained:

> *We can go beyond offering standardised care. As people grow older, their faith often becomes more important to them and we are able to offer help with observing specific rituals that are particular to each of the communities with which we work.*

For some communities, the circumstances in which they arrive in the UK make culturally sensitive services especially important. For people fleeing war or persecution, the extent to which generic services are likely to be able to meet their needs is limited. For many, the best chance they have of learning to deal with the aftermath of traumatic experiences will lie with finding effective support among people who share their background, who are then in a position to recommend services that can help to tackle particular issues. As an organisation working with Iraqis in London explained:

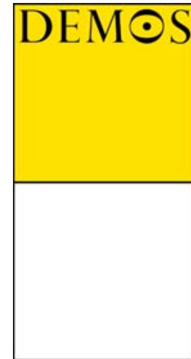
> *Since 2003, everything has changed. We have conducted a needs assessment and our priorities have changed in line with that.*

Taking new steps into unfamiliar territory is also easier for people when they are doing so within safe surroundings. For some, this needs to include culturally and ethnically similar people supporting them in stepping towards new opportunities. One youth centre told us:

> *Bringing them in is easy . . . it's much harder to encourage progression . . . young people feel safe here, because it is people from their own culture and their own area . . . it makes it much easier for us to move them towards mainstream educational services.*

The individual is the collective

In providing advice or advocacy for members of marginalised groups, community organisations are engaged in practical resistance to the forms of discrimination that affect a group as a whole, as well as improving outcomes for the individuals in question. The work of the Commission for Racial Equality embodies this principle, with its support for individuals searching for redress after experiences of racism and discrimination. Likewise, organisations like the Refugee Legal Centre pursue a



wider set of goals about migration and refugee communities partly by intervening in specific cases where there is the possibility of changing the ways that the law is applied.

It is important to distinguish between this sort of advocacy and campaigning work in general. Many organisations that have a campaigning arm also have an advocacy function and the two are connected and feed into one another. But even when there is not an overt campaigning purpose underpinning an organisation's involvement in advocacy work, carrying out advocacy work for groups that have been systematically excluded as a result of an arbitrary factor such as race or gender means that even when advocacy work does not connect into a wider campaigning goal, it still serves a broader purpose.

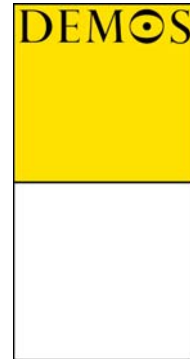
One group that provides befriending services to homeless families does not, for instance, set out with goals beyond those which connect to the needs of the particular families with which they work. But many of the families in question are homeless as a result of being former refugees or asylum seekers, and a disproportionately high number of them come from black and minority ethnic groups. By working on individual cases that relate to these families, the group is effectively campaigning on much bigger injustices; by tackling each case at a micro-level, it is challenging the status quo within larger institutions that allows the needs of minority communities to be treated unfairly or simply overlooked.

Black and minority ethnic organisations are much better at understanding their wider social mission in terms of making a difference to individual lives as a result of this connection.

Bridging the divide

Organisations rooted in their communities can act as vital conduits for information that will help to improve outcomes for individuals and communities as a whole. The coordinator at one centre explained that she felt that she was able to deal with both sides of the coin as a result of her own upbringing in what was at that time a British colony. Because she could engage with the bureaucratic operations of a London local authority, and at the same time was able to empathise with the experience of people who had arrived in the UK with very limited experience of the restrictions that applied to accessing support from local or central government, she could act as a translator for both camps. As a result, she was a gateway through which information could pass to community members who were struggling, while being able to communicate to local officials where they were going wrong in their approach to the needs of local residents.

Organisations often act as hubs, directing users towards support elsewhere within their community, as well as towards organisations providing services across the board. Often, the informality of these connections is what helps to convince previously reluctant users to engage – moving from one person you know, to



another person they know, is sometimes easier than a cold referral to an institution you've only seen described on paper. As one worker put it:

> *We use our networking to help [the users]. That way, the experience is more personal than going through the 'right' channels.*

This connecting role is especially important, because it helps to close the gap between people who have been established in an area for several generations and those who have moved there only relatively recently. For one youth worker, this distance was one of the main explanations for some of the entrenched disadvantage experience by his community:

> *It's not to do with having an ethnic minority background. It's all about . . . connections . . . that part of your background.*

By understanding the lens through which information is likely to be viewed, organisations are able to disseminate it in a way that leaves individuals using their services open to the potential of accessing provision. One worker explained: 'Our community does listen to its peers more than other institutions.'

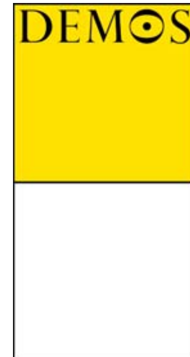
Policing was an area in which it was particularly important to acknowledge the unique experience of many black and minority ethnic communities. As one interviewee explained:

> *We deal with a lot of people who come from countries where the police are seen as a threat, not a source of protection. Those attitudes come with them when they move to the UK, so the police are already starting on a back foot.*

For many people it is negative experiences of British policing that give rise to cynicism about any positive role that they might play:

> *When I was younger, I was held over the bonnet of a police car more than once, and no one thought that there was anything wrong with it, because I was black. But I wasn't arrested on those occasions – I'd never done anything to justify them stopping and searching me.*

Regaining the confidence of communities failed by the police – either from the UK or abroad – will require more than a PR offensive about changing methods of policing. The most effective strategies must include building trust with the key organisations that already have the confidence of a community, so that the police's legitimate role can be reasserted. Equally, organisations need to be confident that the police are investing time and effort in their area because they genuinely recognise the need to improve the quality of life of local residents – not because they are discreetly trying to reduce the threat of riots or, more recently, terrorist attacks. One organisation described how in their area, less than 1 per cent of the police came from the ethnic communities that made up over 10 per cent of the local authority area. But recently, the police had sought her out for advice on recruiting more officers and existing police officers were being escorted on visits to a number of their projects.



Community organisations are also able to reach out in specific ways to particular groups within their communities – such as young people – who might otherwise struggle to access the information or support they need. They are a trusted source of guidance. One interviewee explained that their service was definitely focused towards encouraging their users to access mainstream services. She explained:

> *It's not about ghettoising our young people, but we can help to bridge the gap between mainstream services and their own starting point. Because they trust us, we can accompany them to difficult appointments, and so it works. Many young people say that we help them more than the professionals do.*

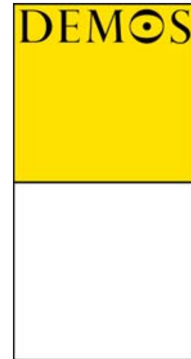
Boosting formal participation

Community organisations can also act as access points for formal politics and other participative work. As much as some community organisations can sustain unhelpful community elites, when they use their power responsibly, they are also among the only organisations than can succeed in ensuring that the 'representatives' of the community are as diverse and reflective as possible of the community.

Involvement in the political process – at local and national levels – was central for many of the organisations with which we spoke. A number were actively involved in trying to reconnect their users with the mainstream political process – one youth worker had, for instance, taken her young women's group to visit the Houses of Parliament to give them a greater understanding of the way politics operated. Another group was aiming to change the way in which local communities connected with the political process. The Muslim communities in their area, they explained, engaged on grand-scale issues, such as foreign policy, but sometimes overlooked other fights on a more local scale. Because they were engaged only on macro-scale issues, their sense of disenfranchisement from the political process continued to grow, because they rarely experienced victory. This group was working to ensure that political energies were distributed across the local, national and international spheres, generating successes for campaigners working in those areas, and giving local policy-makers a much better connection with some of the marginalised communities in their area. The group represented:

> *the intersection between the policy agenda and the local communities that want to engage on issues like healthcare, youth provision and care for old people.*

Community organisations also represent one way to start to tackle the role that religion ought to play in the public realm. Intellectual energy in this debate is often diverted towards heated discussions about the appropriateness, or otherwise, of the involvement of religion in matters of the state. But whatever the stance on that question, there is little debate that an understanding of people who practise a faith – as well as those who don't – should be part of the context in which policy-makers operate if they are to be effective. By offering a non-political and non-institutional



route into discussion about policy-making and service delivery, they can start to tackle the practical problems created by the fact that, at the moment, access to the policy-making process for members of certain religious communities – particularly Muslim – can be very limited.

Connected to this was the level of volunteer support many groups had. One interviewee explained how when she described the role that volunteers played within her organisation, Westminster policy-makers were surprised by the reasons given by volunteers for their offers of support. She said:

> *They were used to thinking of volunteering in terms of self-interested motives, like improving your CV, but for our volunteers their motivation is rooted in their faith and their sense of belonging to their peers. Those are very different reasons for giving up your time, and it is central to the support that people feel they can get from us.*

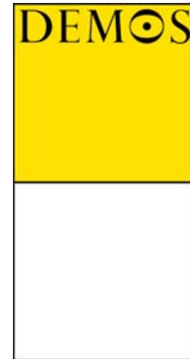
Volunteer support is important not only because of the value of the work itself, but also because volunteering is often the first step for people aiming to take a more active role in their communities in general.

Working the change: versatility in shifting settings

Organisations were increasingly seeing the initial reasons for their existence ebb away, or change significantly. Because of the major shifts that communities go through in their first 50 years of living in the UK as a minority, black and minority ethnic groups often found themselves having to cope with a much more complex set of shifts than organisations working in other fields.

One organisation had been set up in response to the needs of a refugee community coming over during a war in their country of origin. Most of their work was on immigration and asylum, providing basic support for people needing help with their English, or with accessing services. In the past five years, however, changing patterns have meant that the majority of their clients are second-generation, British-born members of their community, whose needs are different. This development has also coincided with a perception that their community is no longer in dire need, and therefore a series of funding cuts has ensued.

Users of another centre had shifted from being the dominant group in a particular area to being 'just another minority'. On first moving to the UK, the Somali community that they served had been a strong and constructive presence in the local area, and formed one of the largest minorities in what is an extremely diverse locality. But as new residents moved in from south Asia, they found themselves dominated and, to some extent, drowned out by a far larger group of people who had different – if occasionally overlapping – sets of needs. Again, this had changed the role of the organisation and the individuals operating within it, who were increasingly needing to advocate and campaign for support for their work at a local



level, to ensure that it wasn't wholly obscured by new arrivals. The centre manager explained:

> *There are hardly any Somali social workers or services, and sometimes you find yourself feeling closer to the white community than anyone else. Now there is a whole new generation of Somalis who don't even know that they belong in this area.*

Sometimes, the changes demanded by shifting circumstances or changing expectations proved too much for groups to contend with, and splits followed lengthy arguments about the way forward. One community worker told us:

> *Groups split because someone wants it to move on and others just don't. In the end, they go their separate ways.*

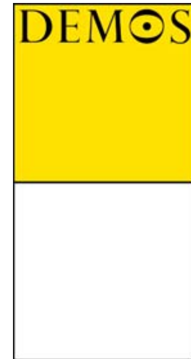
One group was determined to diversify the use of their local mosque, following the example of other high-profile places of worship – such as the East London Mosque – that have sought to become a centre for meeting local people's needs, with legal advice, training opportunities and other forms of support offered. They met with major resistance from older members of the mosque, who were keen to keep the space for prayer alone. Eventually, however, they won the right to use some parts of the mosque's buildings for training and support work, with the majority of the mosque users recognising the value of using parts of the building for a mixture of activities. One worker explained:

> *It used to be that if you want to do something, you've got to get it through the elders at the mosque . . . now that's just a stereotype.*

Refugee crises sparked by different conflicts had acted as the catalyst for the creation of other projects, which found themselves needing to adapt to the increasing flows of people fleeing from the conflicts at the end of the twentieth century. Equally, other organisations emerged as a result of the dispersal of asylum seekers and the rising levels of deprivation among those groups. One organisation described how, earlier in its development, it had focused its energy on particular regions and had always had citizens of the countries of origin actively delivering services within the charity. But as refugee numbers had increased and points of origin diversified, it had been harder to include representatives of each community with which they were working. It remained important to have a focus on the particular needs of new arrivals, however, because

> *it's different to work with black and minority ethnic groups in general, because of the continued connection with the issues and experiences that have led to people leaving in the first place. We have lives both here and there.*

In response, they moved away from campaigning work and refocused on service provision.

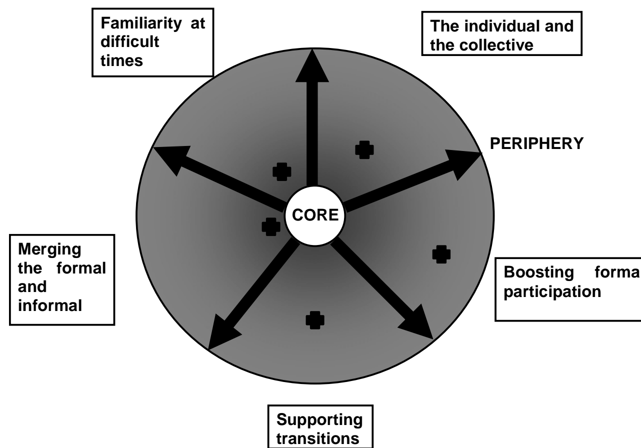


Who does what?

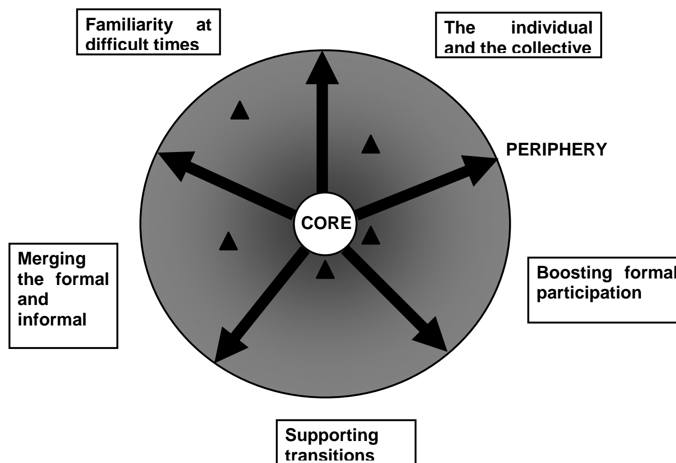
Each of the different organisational categories demonstrates aspects of the five key elements highlighted as being essential to black and minority ethnic community organisations. But their relative strengths in each of these areas does differ. Figure 1 shows how the core activities of the various types of organisation play into the key strengths of the sector as a whole.

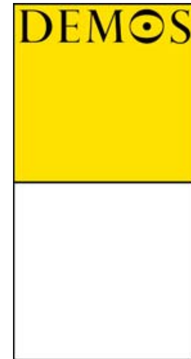
Figure 1 Core functions of community organisations

Fixers

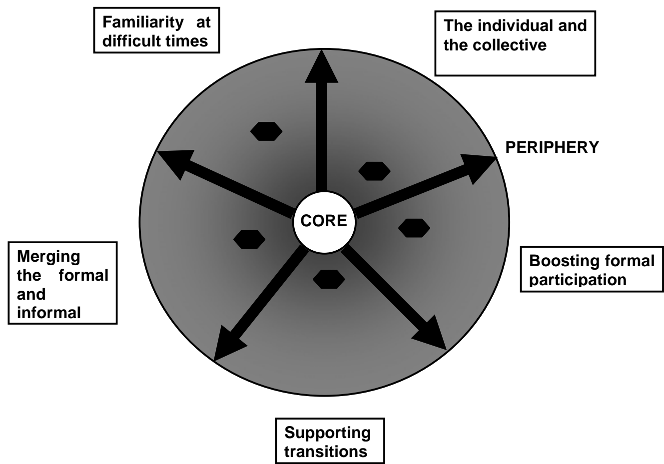


Catalysts

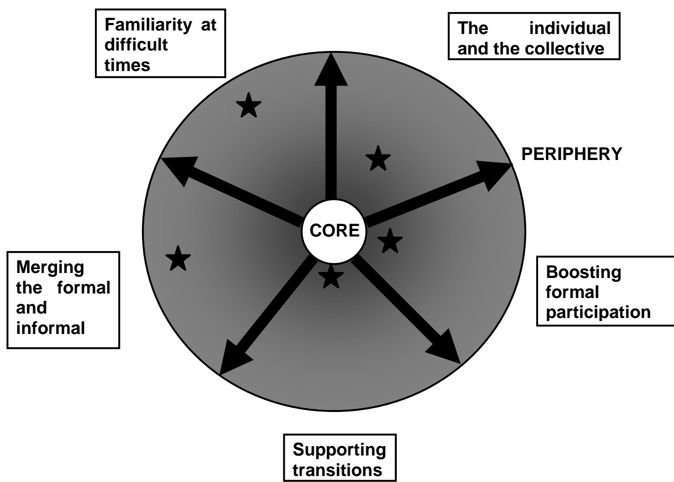




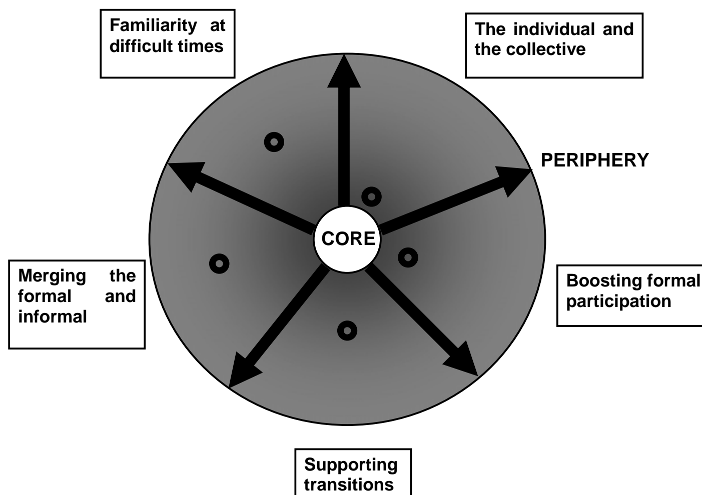
Brokers

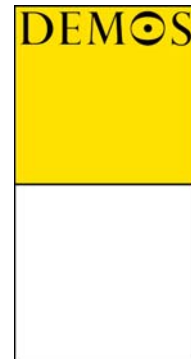


Advocates

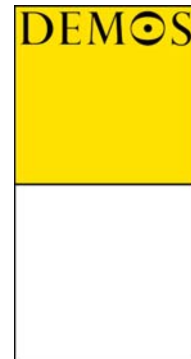


Campaigners





For each of these different sorts of organisation, the demands made on them vary depending on the context in which they are working. Building up a picture of the ways that they function demands an understanding of how these groups perceive the environment in which they operate. The next chapter highlights the key pressures that groups identified during the research.



3. The way we are: understanding the wider environment

Black and minority ethnic voluntary organisations make an essential contribution to the settings in which they work. Levels of resilience and competence within these organisations are extremely high, with committed and talented individuals taking on the pernicious consequences of being part of a marginalised group and building enduring and effective solutions. For these communities, there are certain roles that mainstream service providers cannot play, for two possible reasons. First, they may well lack the knowledge to support people, perhaps in terms of language skills, or in relation to the wider factors that shape their starting point. Second and far harder to resolve, is that they will often lack the empathy and understanding that people need in order to feel confident enough to come to an organisation when they are facing challenging circumstances.

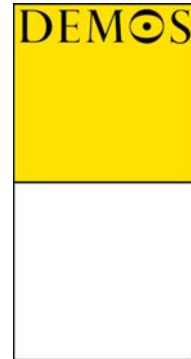
But although effective integration with mainstream provision can take time to happen, it is also unacceptable to abandon marginalised groups to 'sink or swim' on their own terms. If we aspire to creating a just society, we need to make sure that the increased levels of economic and social disadvantage experienced by members of black and minority ethnic groups aren't allowed to worsen as a result of an expectation that people will easily converge towards existing modes of service provision and participation. But heavy-handed attempts to go directly into communities can be just as alienating, leaving politicians and services providers with a dilemma.

Black and minority community groups therefore have a vital part in ensuring that inequalities and injustices are dealt with in their communities. But they cannot operate wholly independently from the larger institutions in their vicinity. They often draw on services and expertise that lie outside their scope. As a result, the relationships with government and other institutions form a central part of the operating context for community organisations. At both a central and a local level, these issues play out within four main areas:

- policy
- consultation: formal and informal influence
- infrastructure: money and regulation
- governance.

Policy

Part of the answer to this dilemma lies with the creation a supportive basis for organisations that act as the bridge between communities and the wider context in



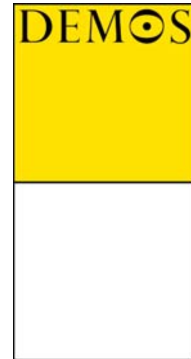
which they live. Support must go beyond the traditional conversations about money and resources and must look more broadly at the framework in which organisations work. Anti-poverty schemes and high-profile community cohesion work mean that the policy context for community work is now far better than in previous years. But the messages from others suggested that the effect was not as widespread as politicians might have hoped.

Since 1997, the government has recognised this, through interventions like New Deal for Communities, Local Strategic Partnerships and the redesign of a range of different funding streams to better reflect the needs of smaller groups. In fact, for many organisations the existence of the funding tied to these initiatives has been central to their early development. One organisation we spoke to was able to start up full operation through money from the Department of Health. Another group said: 'For us, New Deal for Communities was vital to getting started, and the SRB [Single Regeneration Budget] round was important too, although that mattered less.' Often the character of operations was determined by the nature of funding that organisations were able to access. One worker explained: 'Where funding is available, we develop; if not, we can't.'

These interventions were especially advantageous where communities were geographically contiguous. For them, money from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and other major statutory sources – such as the Children's Fund and the structural funds from the European Union, for example the European Social Fund – had been central to their sustainability over a period of several years. For areas which had benefited from these focused initiatives, the experience of statutory funding was often very positive. 'The money has been pouring in for groups like this,' said one inner-city youth worker.

But not every organisation has experienced the success of those supported by the targeted initiatives designed to work specifically with community groups. Some found the experience of belonging to a specific minority ethnic group seemed to hold them back in accessing funds. Others had a more dispersed user group, which made it hard to access local money. Still others found that it was extremely difficult to access money not specifically targeted at black and minority ethnic groups – funders, especially from the statutory sector, couldn't see past their community of origin to look at the activities they delivered on a level footing with non-specific groups. Many found that life had become harder, not easier, since racial and religious tension had worsened.

Policy has also sometimes worked with definitions that pay little heed to the ways in which communities or individuals would describe themselves, creating a barrier to communication before real work has even begun. The conflict between faith and ethnic identifiers, for instance, is not a new one. But for groups working in the day-to-day business of service provision, lacking the means to describe accurately the groups with whom they work is frustrating and a seemingly pointless barrier:



> *Surely, the way someone defines themselves tells us as least as much about that person, and the community that they come from, as the way someone sitting far from the situation in central or local government chooses to define them?*

One interviewee talked about experiences with central government's approach to defining individuals according to certain criteria:

> *For a long time, many individuals have been saying they would rather use their faith identity – Muslim – than their ethnic one. It's not a new thing. But the central government departments seem confused about whether or not that's OK. Partly, I wonder if that's because discrimination against Muslims is now more of a problem than discrimination against people because of their skin colour.*

One woman explained:

> *Faith is an important part of the identity of the young people we work with. When people come off drugs through our services, we often find that faith is their main motivation. But it isn't all about religious observance – the degree to which someone practises their faith is only part of the picture in terms of whether they use their religion to describe who they are or not. For many of them, it's more about having guiding values than attending mosque or wearing hijab.*

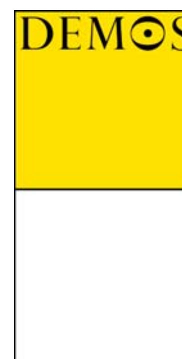
Labels also help to give rise to the familiar complaint that minority communities are homogenous masses, when in fact their needs – and opinions – will differ as much as any other large group. 'We need to work in different ways, with different groups, from different countries,' one centre manager explained. For Muslims, the negative consequences of this were particularly stark, as one person put it:

> *Sometimes I feel like the only people who are seen to speak for the whole community are the terrorists, and they are the least representative of all.*

Acknowledging people's faith identity within service provision does not immediately imply a need to start meeting a particular set of spiritual needs. As one worker put it: 'Of course there are needs that we can't meet, and they will go to mosque or to church for that.' Another youth worker explained: 'I see it as an identity problem, not a faith problem.' In his view, it was important to connect with people's faith in delivering what were, essentially, secular learning and skills opportunities, because it gave a positive outlet for faith, rather than it becoming something that was hidden, or only a point of contention with others around them.

In fact, working with the grain of people's faith identities was often as much a practical decision as any other:

> *We're a secular organisation, but the vast majority of our users are Muslim. Although we haven't experienced a high number of incidents, you can't deny that people aren't as comfortable as they used to be. They come to us more before they go into integrated provision.*



The view from Westminster and the town hall: renegotiating the relationship

The message from community organisations is that engagement with central and local government fails on two fronts. First, the current ambiguity about the success or otherwise of multiculturalism has begun to impact on the confidence with which politicians feel that they can talk about the value of organisations rooted within specific minority communities. Second, statutory engagement with community organisations tends to be instrumental in character – they are brought in when they can deliver an outcome that they were not involved in determining was necessary.

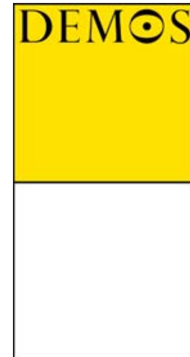
One person explained:

> *Our relationship with government often feels like a one-way street. They come to us for help with consultations, but they don't recognise the wider value of the networks that we have within our community, nor do they recognise the level of effort and resource that goes into building that credibility. There's no mutuality in our relationship with them.*

One organisation explained that their borough had special escorted trips for councillors to parts of the borough, and members of the voluntary sector were expected to turn up at the different venues. It was costly in terms of time and money, but many organisations felt obliged to attend because they received grants from the authority. 'This is the nature of the communication *between us and the borough*', the manager explained.

Others found central government equally frustrating, with their feedback seen as irrelevant in the bigger scheme already laid out by Whitehall civil servants. 'Central government doesn't listen. They have their own programme and they stick to it. What's the point, though, if it's not addressing our issues?' Another woman explained that she felt that when she took part in consultations, she diverted valuable time and resources away from the core purpose of the organisation. 'Getting involved in consultation means letting our community down,' she explained, 'my heart is for the organisation, so what am I supposed to do?' The experiences of Muslim organisations has been particularly bad in this respect, especially since the attacks in July 2005. One worker had concluded that, 'realistically, you're not going to get listened to unless there's a major national issue'. As a result of these highly charged interactions, there is also very little recognition of the ordinary concerns of black and minority ethnic communities, aside from their 'special' status as minorities. As one worker put it: 'There are other voices . . . their agenda is to have a better life.'

At the local level, organisations also talked about the problem of 'capture', which still loomed large when it came to consultation. Local authorities seemed less keen to deliver services through organisations that might be critical of them, or might advocate for users of their services who weren't getting what they needed. One woman described how difficult it was to criticise the policies of a local authority



that was funding the work of their organisation – 'you don't rock the boat'. But this created tension with the advocacy arm of their work with local communities, who were often dependent on their advice to contest unfair decisions made by the authority. The organisation was trapped between its two obligations: first, to maximise the chances of the people they worked with by drawing down resources that would otherwise be inaccessible to them and, second, to stand up for their users when services aren't delivering in the way that they should. One organisation told us: 'It takes a very conscious effort to stop ourselves from being [co-opted].'

Running while standing still: infrastructure, regulation and resources

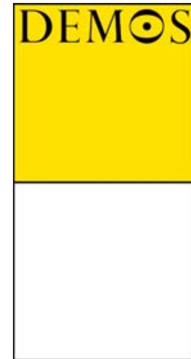
Community organisations are required to separate out their service delivery functions from the informal, advocating and campaigning roles that they might play. The engagement of many statutory funders takes little account of the degree to which the value of their role lies in the grey area in which they operate, between all the roles that their users need. Likewise, their credibility also rests on their ability to move between challenge and support, both for the individuals with whom they work, and the institutions with which they connect. The model in which these functions are wholly separate from one another reflects a policy-makers' worldview – in real life, the experiences of individuals are not so separate from the experiences of whole communities. In the words of one worker: 'My organisation provides services for people in need. But where the service stops, we will advocate for our users' needs.'

Almost every organisation taking part in the research expressed an interest in growing, and recognised the need for paid staff, more formal structures and measurement of success. But the perception of 'professionalisation' was sometimes a cause of tension with the founding community. One worker said:

> *Sometimes the extent to which the community feels they 'own' us is a hindrance now, as we get increasingly professional; community members resent that. For us, we try very hard to stay close to community needs, but we aren't there to provide activities just for the sake of it.*

When it comes to statutory funding, relationships with non-statutory groups often place emphasis on 'additionality'. Community organisations have to be offering something over and above what statutory services would in the same situation. Often, however, the value of that contribution is hard to define in measurable terms. It also, questionably, assumes the primacy of statutory services over those offered by existing groups. Community groups have often been in an area for longer, and may have more experience in offering a certain sort of support to a particular group of people.

Problems often emerged for organisations at even the most practical level. One group reported, for instance, that their experience had been that local authorities had moved away from providing offices to local groups, creating a much higher hurdle over which new groups had to jump before they could operate



independently. Another organisation had found themselves victims of their own success, as a local authority progressively withdrew more and more support as the organisation began to thrive. The director said:

> *They can be quite merciless . . . I think, in a way, they envy our results . . . now they want to cut the grant so, in the end, our success is our downfall.*

Some organisations talked about a 'divide and rule' policy that seemed to erode the connections between groups that shared interests by forcing them to compete over small amounts of money. These funding sources were often specific to the black and minority ethnic sector and chipped away at the sense of commonality that minority groups may have had with one another on particular issues:

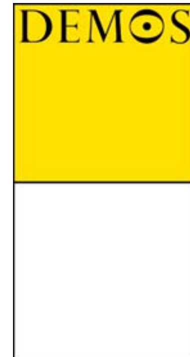
> *Sometimes I wonder if they don't want self-made organisations like ours to speak cohesively, because when we do that we're very powerful.*

For many organisations, some of the most serious challenges came as they progressed towards more complex forms of regulation. 'It took us quite a while, through a maze of political loopholes,' one director said. His organisation had eventually incorporated successfully, but he went on to highlight the two key areas in which they had faced difficulties. First, he said, they had struggled with understanding what was needed from the guidance that was provided. Second, even when the requirements had been figured out successfully, they often experienced difficulties gaining access to the required expertise.

Capacity-building needed to happen in two key areas:

- *technical knowledge*: people setting up organisations need to have a good understanding of the limitations that apply to the process of setting up a charity
- *knowing when and how to ask for help*: it can be hard to identify at what stage in the process there has been a shift away from 'informed amateurism' and towards a need for a professional. People new to the process need help deciding when to bring in expert advice, and for people from communities that are relatively new to the UK, this may include access to networks which will connect them to the sources of this advice.

Incorporating as a charity and, in most cases, also as a company limited by guarantee presented many organisations with major difficulties, especially those that were based in communities with limited experience of dealing with legal and technical vocabulary. For some groups, the right sort of support at the right stage in their development had been critical for them moving on. One woman had received extensive support from the Commission for Racial Equality, who 'had really handheld [us] through it'.



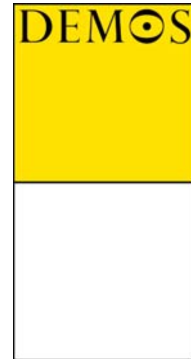
Getting on board: governance and community organisations

Good governance is central to the continued health of the voluntary and community sector, particularly those organisations operating at the edge of work recognised by statutory bodies as being essential. As is often the case, management committees usually had at least one or two professional community members, coming from accountancy or law and, in some cases, from successful businesses. Several organisations also spoke about the importance of having user involvement in governance, with some having at least one place reserved on the committee for a user of the services.

One small organisation was born as a result of the creation of a highly focused allocation of government funding, intended to improve radically the circumstances of families living on a particular estate. A high proportion of the residents were south Asian and the statutory board was successful in creating a representative panel to make strategic decisions about resource allocations. For one particular group, however, their specific focus on women in the area was problematic. In fact, the project was allowed to go ahead only because of the standing of the female founder, who had a long history in the area and was trusted by men and women alike. But even she faced almost insurmountable hurdles when she tried to introduce activities requested by members of the young women's group that were perceived to be unsuitable for women. Because the board for the statutory money was reflective of the make-up of the area, older men were able to block the funding for these sorts of activities. As a result, the statutory funding was held in thrall to a set of values that did not uphold the principles of equality for which the initiative was established in the first place. Without the will or the resources to undermine the project as a whole by contesting the case in public or challenging its legality, the project simply went 'the long way round' to finding a funder, going to non-statutory sources where accountability structures lay outside the community itself. 'Government funding should be strict,' the development officer said, 'so that women can access it.'

This story corresponds to the worst anxieties of people considering setting up community-led initiatives. Although the particular situation reflects a set of concerns closely associated with Muslim communities, the reluctance to allow the girls' project to go ahead was not justified on religious grounds, but rather on the ambiguous territory in which religion, culture and social convention meet. Many of those requesting the youth work in the first place and those who fought for its survival were members of the Muslim community, as were those who sought its demise. Equally, the refusal to take the case further – the decision to look for an alternative route, as opposed to contesting the unfairness of the decision – had as much to do with the general goodwill towards the project as a whole, as with limited resources and capacity to take the battle any further.

Workers also talked about the difficulties of passing innovations past board members co-opted from statutory services. One youth worker said that he had encountered 'a lot of dogma from the statutory members'. He went on to explain



that in his local area, local authority staff seemed to be preoccupied by process, sometimes at the cost of being able to pursue truly original work. He said:

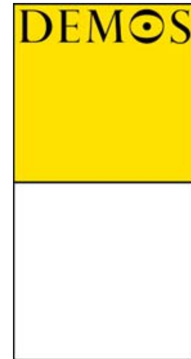
> *They were obsessed with process, and were reluctant to consider an increased role for the voluntary and community sector. The local voluntary sector ended up feeling very uncomfortable with the situation. There's no room for lateral thinking, no room for being creative.*

Ultimately, the story is a stark example of the way in which governance – often seen as the less exciting side of life in a voluntary organisation – can hold the key to the sort of fundamental decisions that can shape the outlook of a whole organisation. Getting it right is not simply a case of going through the motions, but is one of the critical tasks facing any organisation aiming to work effectively on the issues confronting their users.

Like other forms of volunteering, taking part in governance can build the capacity that people need to engage with other forms of political and financial participation. As a result, it is particularly important that we continue to look for increased levels of gender and age equality on management committees of organisations, to ensure that the bases of political and institutional power within our communities are spread as widely as possible. As is often the case with voluntary and community organisations, older men tended to be disproportionately represented on management committees and boards of trustees. Although most organisations expressed an interest in being more representative – and many had taken active steps in an attempt to become more so – in many committees, men constituted well over half of the membership and the majority of these seemed to be drawn from the older sections of the community.

Moving on

For most community organisations, these tensions play a part in their daily organisational life, but stepping in and identifying the reasons that underlie the difficulties can be hard in the face of more immediate pressures. Likewise, for governments and others, the propensity towards incrementalism in policy-making makes establishing major changes in relationships with different groups difficult to justify. The following chapter explains why failing to build on existing improvements in the relationships between black and minority community organisations and government would result in many of the resources currently invested in that arena being wasted. Following through on the initial steps towards change is imperative if the existing initiatives are to result in a real difference.



4. The case for change

Change for the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector is essential for a number of reasons. This sector holds the key to some of the most pervasive injustices and inequalities in the UK. Discrimination on the grounds of race and religion is unacceptable and tolerating the social and economic consequences of such prejudice should be out of the question for a society that premises its institutions on principles of fairness. It is not enough to ensure that the law gives people the right to reply when they are treated unjustly. Rather, positive steps must be taken to ensure that opportunities to work, learn and be healthy are equally open to everyone. Some of the organisations best placed to start taking these steps are rooted in the communities themselves. They need the tools and the legitimacy to embrace that role.

Resources running dry

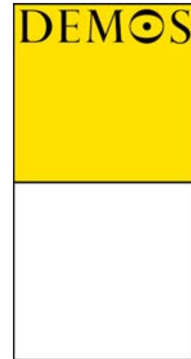
There is also an increasing pressure on non-governmental sources of funding. The government's recognition of the role to be played by voluntary and community sector bodies has meant far more money from statutory services for the sector as a whole. But the targeting of the money towards service delivery, and the relatively limited provision for core costs, has meant that groups have grown in their commitments, without the centralised capacity to deal with the greater administrative burdens experienced by larger organisations. Equally, these resources do not succeed in supporting the 'grey areas' in which community organisations do some of their most important work.

Some groups felt that when this effect was combined with the disappearance of the Community Fund into the amalgamated Big Lottery Fund, which is not associated with funding the sort of 'risky' projects that the Community Fund had supported, bodies that do fund organisations more in line with sustaining their general work are coming under increasing pressure. One person said:

> *For us, the best relationships are definitely with non-statutory funders. They're solid, and they fund us long term and for the right reasons. They're now where we go for the majority of our funding, although the services we provide are definitely the sort of services that local authorities are providing elsewhere.*

Building buffers

Some organisations felt that local authorities seemed to struggle to devolve real power down to genuine community organisations. Instead, much of the resource is often given to intermediary organisations that translate the main funder's relationship with these organisations, which reduces the amount of money which is



then available to the organisations themselves. 'There are too many buffers between us and real power,' one worker said. 'The second tier gets all the money, not the frontline.' For one person, this sort of intervention was indicative of lower expectations of minority ethnic groups:

> *Black and Asian people do not need to be told what to do by white management organisations. Funders must ask themselves: 'Is our money truly in the hands of decision-makers with the interests of the black and minority ethnic community at heart?'*

One group had planned a project working on issues of radicalisation among Muslim children and young people at risk of recruitment. Based on their links with the local communities, they had noticed concerns about much earlier patterns of radicalisation than had previously been reported and they were keen to develop a set of activities that would engage younger children with different ideas about the nature of Islam. But after over two months of trying to reach the appropriate people within the local authority, the group discovered that they could secure the attention of local policy-makers only by passing through a single lobby group that was seen to represent Muslim interests within the authority. 'As gatekeepers, this group seemed to exercise far too much control,' the worker said.

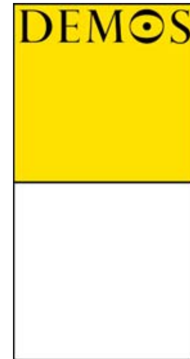
These factors make the case for a different sort of involvement with the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector being essential.

Changing connections

These difficulties cannot be tackled purely by restructuring existing funding methods or issuing guidelines on dealing with different sorts of organisations. Instead, it demands that the politicians and officials dealing with community organisations review their overall approach to working alongside them. The extent to which the agenda for these groups is increasingly set by central or local government priorities creates a climate in which it can appear that the larger institutions are distributing legitimacy among smaller groups through funding and 'insider' relationships. But for many of the communities in question, real legitimacy lies first and foremost in their own organisations, created in response to a society whose mainstream provision was unable to guarantee fairness or protection from discrimination. Therefore, if the aspiration is legitimacy through action, rather than legitimacy through control of resources, it is the politicians and officials that should be looking to community organisations to build their credibility, rather than the reverse.

Building these more effective connections with the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector would lead to three key benefits:

- ensuring all communities have the channels through which to access services to meet their needs



- authentic and varied voices explaining the experience of communities from the inside
- building capacity on the basis that communities need, rather than on a more remote or narrow assessment of need.

Delivering social justice

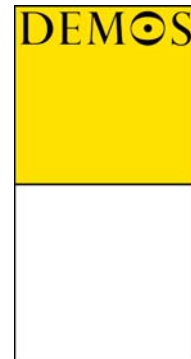
Communities that are exposed or find themselves under threat tend to be disproportionately likely to experience ill health, educational underachievement or unemployment, which is already a worrying indictment of the extent to which we are failing some black and minority ethnic communities in the UK. But this is exacerbated by difficulties in engaging successfully with services than can help to offset the consequences of these inflated levels of disadvantage for individuals and families. Although it isn't enough to address the increased poverty and associated issues solely by investing in services to minimise their consequences – because this doesn't address the underlying sources of structural injustice – good public services are one part of the solution to the problem.

Successfully ensuring that people access the right mainstream public provision is a central part of the work of many of community organisations. Equally, these organisations also have the cultural and social networks to facilitate service provision coming closer to individuals within their communities, by producing hybrid solutions that allow service providers to connect with clients through the more informal structures that community groups are expert in creating. Through offering people a secure place to express their needs to people in a position to meet them, community organisations help government and institutions achieve their overarching purposes relating to equality and social justice. As one worker said: 'The greatest thing we have to offer [at the centre] is safety.'

A variety of voices

One of the most frequently heard complaints about engagement with black and minority groups in the UK is that there is an expectation of uniformity within – and sometimes across – a range of ethnicities, simply because they share countries, or even regions, of origin. But for the purposes of everyday life, as well as for more complex and challenging forms of political engagement, the categorisation of groups in this way cannot work in favour of people trying to engage with the experiences of different communities. As one organisation's director put it: 'Institutional tokenism is as dangerous as institutional racism.'

Community groups are a good way to connect with a much broader cross-section of voices. Although some of the individuals running the organisations will be highly adept at negotiating political game-playing, many can offer a departure from the polished performance of the community leaders that are often viewed with scepticism by others.

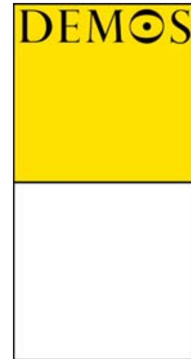


The government should come to the roots . . . people who aren't yesmen . . . [people who] tell the truth. With us, whatever is truth is what's being said.

Recognising a range of voices from within communities also reduces the tension that organisations experience between themselves when methods of engagement create a situation where people are vying to be 'the' voice of their community for a particular institution. As one worker explained: 'We're not in competition with other Muslim organisations . . . we're just adding another voice.'

Building capacity beyond institutional boundaries

A relationship with the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector resting on a more equal footing would allow institutions and government to engage with capacity-building of communities on their own terms. In part, this will require engaging with the concrete practical needs that organisations have in terms of running sustainably within the legal and financial operating circumstances in which they work. But it also demands a different set of expectations about the nature of the support that organisations will need. By engaging differently with these organisations, the institutions trying to offer them support can focus on a wider set of concerns than simply their ability to deliver along the lines of predetermined organisational targets. As one person put it: 'It's not just financial, they need to step down and sit with them and talk to the community.'



5. Finding the way forward

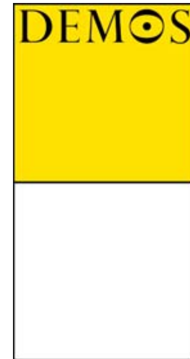
There are four clear principles that emerge from *Change Within*, each of which leads to a series of possible practical responses. These are:

1. Allow communities to tell outsiders about what they need, rather than use interventions to weave their real-life experiences into a discussion rooted in Westminster politics.
2. Government should play a key role in tackling issues relating to black and minority ethnic infrastructure, but cannot achieve change alone.
3. Develop the tools to tackle ambiguity, rather than assume that it will be resolved decisively.
4. Don't abdicate responsibility for promoting the well-being of black and minority ethnic communities to extraneous factors over which we have little control, such as the passing of time, or national characteristics.

Cutting through chaos: amplifying the voices that matter

Recent years have seen a major increase in the amount of discussion about some of the issues faced by black and minority ethnic communities. In large part, this represents a positive step; the sense that the issues that concern minority groups within society should be issues that concern us all is certainly right. The nature of the debate is worrying at times, however. It puts the spotlight on 'soft' problems like identity, culture and religious tension and gives limited attention to the ingrained problems of structural inequality. But it is this systematic social and economic exclusion that renders many ordinary people unable to contribute to debates about the values and norms that govern their communities, leaving the job of representing their views to a small number of highly mobile, politically astute community leaders. The result is that often the voices that could articulate the 'real' experiences are drowned out by a cacophony of commentary from people far more distant from everyday life.

It is important that this wider debate, therefore, does not obstruct the development of good quality, practical interventions that can reach the people who most need them. But involving people in endless consultation processes will not work; time is already limited and converting their suggestions into real policy is often difficult to do. Rather, we need to concentrate on developing the existing levers for action in such a way that they become more constructive for organisations themselves, while also providing national information that gives a deeper understanding of the work that is needed in individual communities. The key way to do this is to readdress the way in which organisations are judged as successful or otherwise.



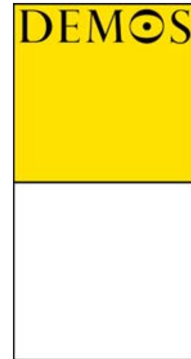
The appetite for reform of assessment systems is definitely present in community organisations. One person told us: 'There were "tick tick tick smile smile" boxes . . . applications . . . if we get a smiley face for this year then we're OK.' But most funding organisations – both statutory and non-statutory – are also struggling with vast quantities of information about activities, beneficiaries and funding agreements that don't give rise to very much that is useful in tackling the overriding problems on which they want to focus their efforts.

All funders of small community organisations need to tackle two aspects of how they judge the success or failure of a project. First, they need to be more receptive to the targets that the organisations themselves have identified as being important. As one person told us: 'It's the form-filling which is a nightmare. One loses the human touch . . . the creativity.' Second, they need to find ways of assessing their contribution to community life as a whole, rather than exclusively through the prism of individual experience. It is not only community festivals and sports activities that have significance for everyone living in an area; for close-knit communities successes in education, health, employment and tackling offending behaviour are also shared victories.

Using sampling for feedback purposes would help to achieve a better quality of reporting back. Drawing on the expertise of existing academic practice, as well as on existing placement schemes for students, sampling would capture detailed information about a cross-section of a project's users, giving better quality information while reducing the bureaucratic burden for workers. It would be important to retain statistical significance – an organisation should sample at least a tenth of its participants. Collecting data should, wherever possible, be an enriching experience for both users and the funded organisation's staff. Rather than focusing on the participant telling the staff member things that both people already know about each another – for example, crude demographic indicators – it should focus on making assessment a tool for getting a different perspective on an individual's progress, as well as giving a clear sense of how well the organisation is achieving its aims.

Underpinning interventions connected with community voice must be the understanding that **visible representation still matters at all levels**. Anxieties about the dangers of tokenism have curtailed many of the conversations about representation in senior roles. But it does continue to matter that the people doing particular jobs share the background of their clients. We are already familiar with how important this can be in frontline service delivery and, as one worker put it, 'money givers must insist on key workers from black and minority ethnic communities'. When it comes to progression into more senior positions, however, the message is less clear. But members of black and minority ethnic communities need to be active at all levels in organisations, especially those that exclusively or partially serve their communities.

The reasons for underrepresentation at senior levels vary. Discrimination and the effects of earlier barriers to achievement – for example within the education system



– are definitely part of the answer. But there are also less clear-cut reasons, which imply the need to attend to the wider experience of employees within organisations. One interviewee explained, that among her staff, anxieties about promotion into particular roles was connected with the extent to which people thought that they would have to distance themselves from their roots in order to advance:

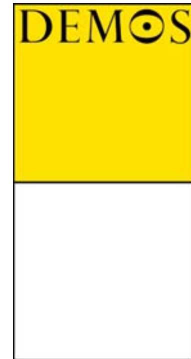
> *It's harder for the professionals among our community because they are more likely to be asked to westernise in some way. Many people stay in lower tier jobs to stay away from those issues.*

Ghettoising employment opportunities for members of black and minority ethnic groups into organisations that serve only their specific community, or in frontline service delivery, will mean that the pressures that operate on these community groups are less likely to be alleviated. Avoiding it will be partly about **fighting the overt and covert forms of discrimination that people from minority groups face**, through clear expectations communicated from the highest levels of organisations about appropriate behaviour and language and staff appointed to deal with issues when they arise and a clear disciplinary structure. But employers – in private, public and voluntary sectors – also need to **confront the organisational habits that mean that people from minority groups feel that they won't 'fit' with existing norms**.

Finding the right place for government

Statutory funding will never meet all the needs of organisations based in black and minority ethnic communities, not least because many of these organisations will need to retain their independence to be critical of their local authorities and government and will feel compromised by exclusively statutory funding. If an organisation is fulfilling a partially critical role in relation to government, it is likely that it will want to retain some financial independence from government funding. So, **government must work out the role that it can play most successfully** in relation to these organisations, through in-depth dialogue with the community organisations, local authorities and users of services. The government should not aim to create a single, static explanation of their approach, but should build in the flexibility to make adjustments as the needs of individuals and communities change.

In particular, local government must seek a way to support organisations that dissent from existing policy but have a strong connection with the communities they serve, without undermining the challenge that they make to existing practice. One way to do this might be to devolve some decisions about funding to non-authority staff. Authorities could also use the involvement of major, non-statutory funders as an endorsement of an organisation's practice, without repeating the assessment processes that they have already carried out. Equally, funders from outside the statutory framework must continue to support the work that lies



outside the remit of government money, rather than vying for the same ground as statutory funders.

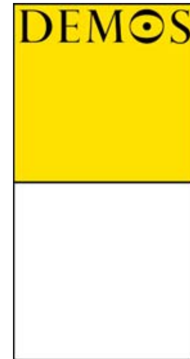
As statutory funding becomes increasingly common for smaller community groups, there remains a vital role for non-statutory funding sources. By operating outside the target-led framework of public service agreements, these bodies can support the work that happens in the 'grey areas' of these organisations, as a result of what they represent to their users, rather than because of the precise detail of their remit. **Funders should continue to experiment with approaches that allow organisations to develop autonomy**, such as longer-term funding, flexible funding agreements and support for initiatives that can become social businesses. **Government should learn from innovation among non-statutory funders, as well as from service delivery organisations**, to ensure that their resources are being used in the most effective way. Bringing expertise in from the Community Fund, for instance, when the Treasury was designing the Futurebuilders approach, resulted in the emergence of one of the most innovative of recent government funding streams.

Non-governmental funding streams also have the potential to **take a stand against the risk-averse approach to funding** that sometimes blights governmental and quasi-governmental funders. The areas covered by lottery funding are becoming progressively less controversial, with groups working with refugees and asylum seekers – for example – feeling less well supported since the 'scandal' of the lottery money supporting an organisation that campaigned against some aspects of UK immigration policy. By funding organisations that operate on the periphery of the insider–outsider world of statutory funding, **non-governmental funders can ensure that work on issues outside political and popular comfort zones continues**.

Working through ambiguity

An enduring source of tension in this area of policy development is connected to the fact that issues arise that present people with a dilemma that limits their capacity to take practical action. The example given earlier in this report of the potentially sexist dissemination of government money illustrates that even within the best designed community policy, there is the potential for abuse. This is not surprising, because many minority ethnic communities are seen as being the places where our collective confusion about conflicting societal values is being played out most starkly. They are also the place where they are most visible, making it tempting to 'experiment' more with these communities than other more familiar experiences of exclusion and poverty.

These communities, often already at greater social and economic disadvantage than others in the UK, should not be the place in which collective debates about the conflict between rights, values and culture are allowed to play out at the expense of taking practical steps to improve people's quality of life. But while these ever larger

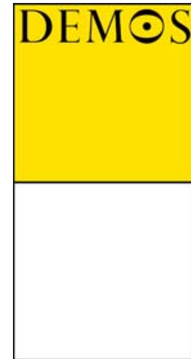


themes are being explored at a national level, everyone involved with these communities is likely to be aware of the major issues into which seemingly trivial decisions can develop. As a result, we need to **develop tools that people, inside and outside communities, who are trying to negotiate these multiple ambiguities can use as a foundation for making decisions**.

In business, risk is seen as a necessary part of any venture and often a precursor to major success. In the public and voluntary sectors, risk is rightly seen as less acceptable because of the responsibility owed to taxpayers and donors. But making risk-aversion too central in decision-making can lead to missed opportunities. It can also lead to skewed emphasis on certain risks – those that can be measured, or those that have been encountered before – which makes it extremely difficult when dealing with certain sorts of ambiguity found at the grassroots level of community organisations.

We need to ensure that the right people, with experience of real community work, are making decisions about which groups should get support. **Local authorities and non-statutory funders should aim to appoint people with real grassroots experience to strategic posts; this is essential to developing healthy community organisations. No one should be making decisions about community groups without real experience of how they work – either voluntary or paid.** This ought to apply in central government as well as within local authorities. The shortage of committee members for community groups, especially black and minority ethnic community groups, creates a host of vacancies that policy-makers could take up to gain a clearer picture of the world in which their work takes effect.

We then need to make sure that their judgement is sufficiently trusted to allow them to pursue relationships with organisations that operate at the margins. **Taking practical steps to build up progressively more trusting relationships with organisations** – such as funding that increases year-on-year, staff secondments from other organisations or shared premises – will help to offset the higher risk of working with community groups on their terms as opposed to within strictly delineated statutory funding agreements. **Supporting good governance – with user involvement, diverse membership and good-quality advice and training when needed** – will also help to offset concerns about times when conflict arises as a result of differing opinions over cultural values in relation to the work of the organisation. Funders should use their influence to help to ensure that good governance happens within organisations – helping funded groups to find people to fulfil roles, as well as having high expectations of good quality work from committees. This could include giving their staff time off to take part in governance activities themselves – often valuable professional development for people whose professional life tends to be remote from the people affected by the decisions that they make.



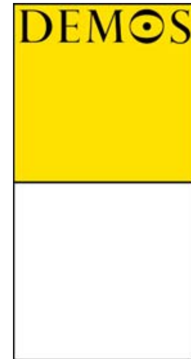
Doing more, saying more

In the debate about engaging with black and minority ethnic groups, one inevitable response is to point out the extent to which immigrant groups over centuries have gradually integrated over time, becoming part of UK society while also retaining certain aspects of their own identity. A similar complacency is in evidence when some people talk about the growth in racist extremism, evidenced in the success of the British National Party in the 2006 local elections. People often respond that the UK is relatively less extreme than parts of continental Europe, and that there is no precedent for extremist politics making it to Westminster.

These prevailing attitudes form the foundation for a relatively piecemeal approach to tackling equality issues in the UK. Of course, time is one of the factors determining how settled people feel in a new place. But it will never be the whole story, nor should we assume that the extended periods that it takes some groups to settle are inevitable when, in reality, they often reflect problems within the society receiving them. Likewise, a democracy will always have people operating on the margins, but that is no reason for politicians and others in the public gaze not to tackle explicitly the pernicious form of 'intellectual' racism peddled by the British National Party. Although the grey areas surrounding multiculturalism will often give rise to a more interesting debate, we cannot allow these conversations to become a distraction from tackling prejudice where it is growing, nor from our practical efforts to build a society in which new communities are quickly absorbed into the social and economic infrastructure and equipped, as a result, to build their own lives within the UK.

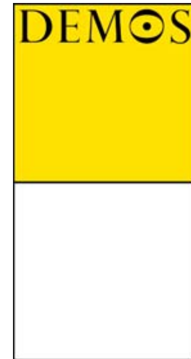
Politicians, commentators and other leaders spearheading the debate on these issues have a responsibility to continue to articulate an expectation of full equality, not almost equality, at the centre of political and media rhetoric. Rapid change is difficult for communities to achieve, but this does not mean that it is never possible, nor that we should accept partial success as being sufficient. The creation of a single equalities body must be taken as an opportunity to restate important foundation principles about the ways that we expect people living in the UK to be treated, and what they can legitimately expect from the population of which they are a part. **The opportunity to 'relaunch' the equality debate with the opening of the single equalities body should not be wasted.** It should include reminders about the pervasive nature of the 'old' inequalities, like race and gender, as well as a fresh engagement with 'new' injustices affecting people with disabilities and relating to sexual preference or faith.

At the same time, we must **find language that reflects the truth of what is actually happening in real organisations**. Faith has an impact on the services people engage with and the relationships they build around them. Understanding both the positive and the negative consequences of that behaviour is possible only when we give the groups engaged with that sort of work the chance to explain what they do in the terms that correlate with users' and volunteers' perspectives.



This should be accompanied by practical steps at a local level in order to build sustainable change. **Organisations explicitly addressing community relations should continue to receive support, but we should acknowledge the additional value of groups that manage to generate 'authentic integration'** – bringing people together to address shared priorities such as training or employment, rather than for its own sake. **Campaigning events like Love Music, Hate Racism in London should be taken beyond neutral spaces in city centres into the heart of communities where racism is taking hold.** Likewise, **when there are debates about multiculturalism – the conflicts about values, cultural norms and so on – we should seek to engage as wide an audience as possible**. Progress on tackling the issues we are facing will not be made while the majority of people contributing to the debate are talking about extremists, but only when they are talking to extremists, alongside the moderate voices.

The case for tackling these expectations is not exclusively a moral one. Due to demographic changes, young people from black and minority ethnic groups will be even more critical in ensuring the future health of the UK's social and economic well-being: with birth rates in majority white communities in decline, the higher birth rates of many black and minority ethnic communities means that a significantly higher proportion of working age adults in the next generation with come from these communities. While their needs continue to be met less effectively than those of other groups, we are storing up higher training needs and skills shortages for employers in the future. Finding better and faster ways of getting people to the services they need and ensuring that those services are equipped to meet their needs on arrival is a central part of ensuring a sustainable future for the UK as a whole.



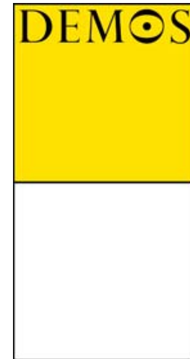
Notes

1 The BNP have, for instance, been vocal in their criticism of services that are targeted at asylum seekers or recently settled people.

2 G Dench, K Gavron and M Young, *The New East End* (Profile Books, 2006).

3 R Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (Simon & Schuster, 2001).

4 The 1990 Trust is an organisation that promotes the interests of Britain's black communities, partly through supporting and strengthening the development of black community networks.



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