

Money's too tight to mention

Ade Sawyerr begins a two-part series looking at the funding barriers facing African community organisations

AFRICAN community organisations are relative newcomers to Britain, purely as a result of immigration patterns. Although primary immigration was supposed to have ended in the 1960s and 70s, a large number of Africans arrived in Britain during the 1980s from different routes and for different reasons. Many came to study and now find themselves with no real urge to return home.

Consequently various associations began to spring up, both to cater for the welfare needs of Africans and to fulfil their needs of belonging to a group. Most African community organisations still struggle to attract funding for their vital services and feel they are making little headway.

Too often, we are viewed as social clubs. While most African community organisations are welfare-oriented, only a few focus on developing and delivering services for a particular sector. As a result their services are not properly defined, and cultural identity is usually used as the only way of differentiating their style of service provision.

In reality, African community groups undertake anything and everything. Yet, in the view of funding agencies, we are unable to quantify the volume of the work or prove its value to the beneficiaries.

One of the biggest obstacles to attracting funding is the fact that many African community organisations are exclusive, contravening the equal opportunities requirements set by most funding organisations. By opening up just a little, we will be able to operate organisations that are attractive to a wider group of people who share the same objectives.

By their very nature, many African organisations are drawn towards past affiliations. The old school networks and tribal associations are certainly desirable, in the sense that we are trying

to help our kith and kin back home, but they also exclude many people with whom we now share a closer bond.

There is also the problem of people who imbibe the individuality of Western society and are no longer interested in becoming part of our community groupings. Increasingly, however, I have come across professional organisations that are looking to grapple with the newer opportunities presented in this country by forming cross-cultural organisations. Another obstacle is the fact that funding for community organisations is borough-centred. African organisations tend to represent people who live all over the country, so they cannot say they specifically service

work they do.

In addition, poor governance is a serious problem for most African organisations. Many are not democratically run. Come election time there is always a tussle, a battle to change the leadership. The organisations fail to attract new members because of issues of accountability and transparency.

Even when organisations do have a constitution, there are often deliberate attempts to subvert it by a small cabal who erroneously believe they have a God-given right to remain in office for as long as the organisation exists. Poor governance makes it difficult, even for groups with an impressive track record in winning funding, to demonstrate their



one particular borough. As a result, they miss out on a wide range of funding opportunities. Some organisations which really cater only for people from, say, Sierra Leone call themselves African in an attempt to project a different image for local funders.

There is an urgent need for African organisations to formalise their operations. Often they are not registered, they do not attain charitable status and nobody knows they exist. Therefore, they are left with little political clout. Group members are not involved in local politics, they do not attend local churches and do not play an active role in parent-teacher associations, so nobody can give them credit for the good community

capacity to properly manage funds.

Thankfully, there is a way forward for African groups to resolve most of these issues and make themselves an integral part of the community. We can promote our different culture and rich heritage that we bring into the melting pot of diversity. We can be Londoners as well as Africans or Ghanaians; after all, we need an audience to expose our culture to.

NEXT WEEK: The way forward

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The way FORWARD

Ade Sawyerr continues his look at what African community organisations can do to get their houses in order

ANY successful organisation has a strongly developed quality assurance system, a democratic structure, a growing membership and an approach that pursues development projects based on need. It has a constitution or defined set of rules to guide its operations. Everyone is kept informed through the correct channels, through attending meetings and ensuring that agenda papers are sent on time, minutes are kept and monthly accounts are rendered.

That is the model which African community organisations must aim for



if they are to overcome the funding and organisational obstacles that continue to hamper them.

It is only when an organisation boasts these key ingredients that it is able to implement successful fundraising strategies and adopt communication programmes that keep it in touch with its public.

Projects must only be developed when people want them; not simply because there is money available. There must be a growing demand for the service and members must be involved in both the development and delivery of projects, as well as monitoring the organisation's overall performance.

Membership growth is also vital. An

organisation's membership must be constantly, if only gradually, increasing because it is from its members that it is able to recruit volunteer workers and future management committee representatives. A flourishing membership allows a group to continue to evolve democratically.

Fundraising must be planned strategically and must actively involve all the members of an organisation. Assistance must be sought from a variety of institutions: international, national, regional, local, trusts, charities and statutory companies.

Organisations also need to be innovative in the way they keep in touch with the public. How do members, funders, employees, local businesses and others come to know about us? What events should we invite people to? How do we circulate reports, brochures, leaflets and posters to let our own target groups and the wider public know about the work we do? Once these critical issues have been sorted out, organisations need to adopt a more proactive strategy to attract community involvement.

It is in the interests of African people to be strongly involved in their communities, especially given the large amount of funding that is flowing into communities as successive governments attempt to tackle urban decay and regenerate inner-city areas.

The funding shift favours organisations that provide a definable service. Local authorities no longer provide general community grants; instead money is often made available through projects jointly funded by local authorities and specific statutory agencies. Health authorities, for example, often join local authorities in

providing funding for groups involved in social care and health promotion.

If organisations are to become involved in local community projects, there are several steps they must take. At an organisational level it is helpful for them to be represented on the board of a local partnership group, as this is where decisions are made on how and where money is spent. At the next level, organisations need to bring their professional expertise to bear by serving on relevant sub-committees.

African people can also gain from seeking employment in the voluntary sector where, at various levels, they make executive decisions and deliver services that benefit the local area. Then there are advisory panels, which allow people to exercise direct influence on their local community.

Most people belong to some kind of an organisation, whether it is a church, a club or whatever. We need to make waves within our local communities and be involved in the decision-making processes that invariably have a major effect on our lives. As individuals, we must therefore seek to join organisations likely to benefit us. As organisations, we need to be affiliated to umbrella groups or support organisations.

The first thing to do is to join the national umbrella organisations, get on the list of the local voluntary action council and make yourself known to the Africa Centre. You must also seek out organisations that provide services to black groups, such as KENTE, Project Fullemploy, Race on the Agenda, the Black Training and Enterprise Group, 1990 Trust, Afford and the Black Regeneration Forum. A new organisation, the Council for Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations, has also been established to build a fund for black organisations.

African community organisations will continue to play a useful role in our lives. In order for that role to be even more effective, it is vital that they organise themselves well and build up the necessary links within the mainstream.

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