

Empowerment for the People



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Ethnic minority communities are now a maturing population with more second-and-third-generation minorities born in this country than the first generation, who were born in Asia, the Caribbean and Africa.

There are individual economic successes but as long as there is underachievement in the school system, the perception that ethnic minorities are consuming more of the economic cake than they contribute will continue.

Some of the facts of inequality in the labour market are frightening but nonetheless real. Only 44 per cent of Bangladeshi people

To attain economic parity ethnic minority communities have to be given the opportunity to help devise non-discriminatory policies that will give them an equal chance to compete at all levels, says Ade Sawyerr

are economically active as against 68% for the white population. Unemployment rates for Black Caribbean (12 per cent), Black African (14 per cent), Bangladeshi (17 per cent), Pakistani (10 per cent), are substantially higher than for the mainstream white population (5 per cent).

African and Caribbean men are over-represented in the service sector, notably transport and communications at 14 per cent and 18 per cent respectively as compared with 9 per cent for the whole population. Chinese people were more likely to work in the distribution, hotel and restaurant sector (71 per cent) compared to an overall figure of 18 per cent on average. One in eight male Pakistani workers is a taxi driver or chauffeur; the national average is one in 100.

Ethnic minorities are more likely to have lower educational attainment, lower employment rates, are less likely to work in managerial grades and suffer an ethnic penalty of earning, on average, over £100 per week less than white managers. Ethnic minority businesses tend to be under-capitalised, often concentrating on personal and professional services to a captive ethnic market, and almost always in high-risk sectors.

The fact that these inequalities persist, despite several government initiatives, points to a need for structural changes backed by sanctions that have a better likelihood of working. Ethnic minority communities have to be given the opportunity to help devise

non-discriminatory policies that will give them an equal chance to compete at all levels.

There is a dearth of ethnic minorities in corporate boardrooms and public sector organisations that claim to be equal opportunity employers yet refuse to disclose the ethnic mix of their workforce because they also claim to be “colour blind”.

One change is to extend the Amended Race Relations Act 2000 to the entire public, voluntary, community and private sector and require them to develop race equality plans and to undertake periodic equality impact assessments. Another is through targets. The Home Office has targets for the employment promotion and retention of ethnic minority workers providing a baseline from which it can periodically measure its progress.

Contract compliance tried as a bold move by the Greater London Council in the 1980s must be brought back and extended to include positive procurement practices that will encourage more equality.

Implementing some of these measures will enable minority businesses access to mainstream markets that are more lucrative and sustainable, which will enable them to grow and be more competitive. It is only when they are operating at higher levels of turnover and profit that the banks will stop discriminating against lending to black, Asian and minority ethnic people.

Young ethnic minority people must realise that education

followed by acquisition of skills is the only way out of poverty and towards a sustained higher income in the jobs market. The more educated you are, the more choice you have at switching careers and changing jobs.

Education must be backed up with skills and training. The Government, facilitating agencies and the corporate world has to be persuaded to provide work experience positions for black people at all levels.

Whatever happens will need a lot of political will to back it up. The way for ethnic minority people to gain economic parity is through political power, on local councils and as representatives in parliament. Making decisions and introducing policies that will give us an equal share in the economic fortunes of this country.

As one of the greatest African leaders Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah said in his campaign to gain independence for Ghana 50 years ago: “Seek ye first the political kingdom and all others will be added.”

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