

## minority groups



# Not all black and white

Recent press stories of cases where funders have rejected applications for failing to adequately target minority ethnic communities have caused considerable anger, but is this really political correctness going mad? The evidence suggests not, say Krishna Sarda (left) and Dr. Christina Julios

The Samaritans and the National Park Authority both made the headlines in February. The former, best known for its work to help the suicidal, had a substantial grant application rejected because “it was not targeting asylum-seekers, ethnic minority communities and the elderly”, according to *The Times*. Meanwhile, the guided tours of the Lake District National Park – a long rural tradition – also became an apparent casualty (prior to a mystery donor stepping in), with the decision to scrap them, allegedly for being “too white and too middle class”.

The stories provoked considerable disbelief, anger and frantic finger-pointing. Predictably, the debate descended into bitter accusations of political correctness and even racism. But behind the headlines there remains the fundamental issue of continuing social exclusion and lack of equal access to services experienced by members of ethnic minorities.

The evidence is staggering. A glance at the Census 2001 reveals growing inequalities between the country's majority white population and marginalised groups in every aspect of socio-economic life, including housing, employment, health and education. Ethnic minorities, in particular, experience the most extreme conditions, with 70 per cent living in the 88 most deprived local authority districts, compared with 40 per cent of the general population (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Certain ethnic and religious groups, moreover, remain disproportionately disadvantaged over time. Data shows, for example, that Muslims have the highest unemployment rate of any religious group, and that Muslim households are the most likely to live in social rented accommodation, experience overcrowding conditions and lack of central heating. People of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin similarly report the highest rates of disability in England and Wales, with Bangladeshis being nearly six times as likely as the general population to have diabetes. Black pupils continue to be more likely to be permanently excluded from school in England than children from any other group. The overall picture of Britain's ethnic minority population is one of deprivation and ill health, socio-economic disadvantage and high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity.

And it's no better in the voluntary and community sector. In fact, the situation is compounded by a persistent lack of access to services and a shockingly uneven income distribution.

Again, the evidence is overwhelming. It is estimated that over two-thirds of the total income of the UK's voluntary sector is generated by general charities with incomes of over £1million (1.6 per cent of the sector). Most Minority Ethnic voluntary

organisations fall outside this band, with approximately 65 per cent of them having an annual income of £10,000 or less. (NCVO, 2004). Furthermore, studies exploring the experiences of Minority Ethnic organisations in their search for funds consistently report the process as being problematic, unfair and fraught with obstacles. Lack of access to funds, prejudice, mistrust and disregard for BME organisations, as well as their under-representation in obtaining contracts with statutory agencies are recurrent themes in the literature. (Yee and Mussenden, 2000; SCVO, 2000).

Despite ethnic minorities now comprising about eight per cent of the UK population, and nearly one third of London's residents, the profile of the voluntary sector remains stubbornly homogeneous, with white, middle-aged British males over-represented at senior management, trustee and decision-making levels. Members of minority ethnic groups, women and people with disabilities remain utterly ubiquitous by their absence.

The argument for change is compelling – and increasingly urgent. Record inward investment into the third sector from FutureBuilders, Venture Capital Fund and the government runs a the risk of reinforcing the current inequalities between the minority ethnic and wider voluntary sector.

As the transformation of Britain's demographic and religious profile continues to gather pace, minority ethnic communities are expected to account for half of the growth in the country's working age population within the next decade. If the voluntary sector is to maximise the wealth of talent and experience of these groups, it must evolve and adapt to the new environment.

This means moving beyond simply securing minority ethnic related project funding and appointing a minority staff member to deliver it until the funding runs out. Mainstreaming the issue requires greater consideration, imbedding the principles within the operational planning and providing the evidence (through monitoring) that services are not just open to all but actively encourage those who have not used them before.

There is a pressing need in the voluntary sector to move beyond ticked boxes and processes. Let us see some serious investment being directed into mainstreaming and developing partnerships between minority-led voluntary organisations and their counterparts with the focus on improving the outcomes for the beneficiaries.

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