Building the Big Society

A Race Equality

Perspective

Daljeet Singh
June 2011

BECON

BECON is a region wide race equality organisation which operates across the North East from offices in Newcastle and Stockton-on-Tees. BECON provides services to BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities to address disadvantage, discrimination, exclusion, inequalities and racism. Services are geared to support individuals, groups and organisations to participate more fully and inclusively in the economic, social and cultural developments of their localities. BECON strives to bring about a more inclusive society promoting equality, diversity, human rights and social justice. In addition to providing services BECON is a network organisation with over a 100 members across the region providing a platform for influence, representation and voice.

Policy and Representation Partnership

The Policy and Representation Partnership is hosted by the Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE) a three-year, Big Lottery-funded project which aims to increase the voluntary and community sector's influence on public policy. The partnership does this in a number of ways: through quarterly policy forum events, training sessions, researching policy areas and sharing information. More on the work of the partnership can be found at www.vonne.org.uk/policy/partnership

Introduction

The 'Big Society' was part of the Conservative Party's 2010 election Manifesto which underpins several policy areas.[1] The Big Society was not only meant to radically change the delivery of public services or reduce costs, which it gets associated with especially by the Labour opposition. The Manifesto clearly identifies the Big Society not only as a set of policies but also as a political philosophy and describes the change from 'big government to Big Society' (p. 8).

The Big Society political philosophy in Conservative party thinking is underpinned by the notion of responsibility – 'government responsibility with public finances, personal responsibility for our actions and social responsibility towards each other' (Ibid: p. 8). This triangulation of responsibility provides fertile ground for the Big Society programme. This sense of responsibility had another significant dimension to it – the notion of 'Broken Britain' (Ibid: p. 35). Big Society in this context referred to personal, social and government responsibility to build a cohesive society.[2]

The building blocks of the Big Society programme were published by the Cabinet Office in 2010 in a document entitled *Building the Big Society*. In that document, the following elements were highlighted.
- (a) More power to communities
- (b) Encouraging people to take an active role in their communities – national citizen service,
- (c) Transfer power from central to local government
- (d) Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises – public sector workers could also participate,
- (e) Publish government data

---

[1] *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010
[2] However, the notion of Broken Britain did not get explicit mention in the Cabinet Office document Building the Big Society that lays out the groundwork for the government's future direction.

The Coalition Government is proposing a radical agenda of reform to how the British state provides services and welfare rights to its citizens. Simultaneous changes are being brought into different policy areas at an unprecedented pace. This process of change is underpinned by the government's thinking on personal responsibility and individual choice.

Big Society and Race Equality

In order to understand the impact of an emerging area of government thinking and associated policies dissolution of centrally controlled targets and oversight of local authorities and other public bodies, changes in regional governance, reduction in investment to build the infrastructure of voluntary and community organisations, and a drive towards 'localism' – BECON organised two consultations with the BME voluntary and community organisations in the region[3]. These two events have contributed immensely to this policy document. In addition, BECON's Policy Officer undertook a review of available literature on Big Society, along with emerging areas of government policies.

The policy paper seeks to inform BECON, BME VCS, wider VCS, partners and stakeholders about the Big Society programme from a race equality perspective. This policy paper will be disseminated to BME VCS and wider VCS organisations within the region and across the country. This paper will be used to:

- inform the campaign being led by Voice4Change England on its engagement with the Office for Civil Society
- inform BME VCS organisations in the North East region through our existing projects about learning from the project and how this emerging agenda will affect them
- develop activity with local authorities in the region to embed learning from this policy work.

By engaging with the BME VCS and BME communities through consultations, BECON was able to identify significant elements of this policy programme in relation to the Big Society agenda. We discuss these issues in relation to five broad areas:

Volunteering and service delivery

Volunteering and service delivery to local communities by VCS organisations is central to the Big Society programme. Some commentators, including Blond and Norman,[4] trace this emphasis on volunteering through the Conservative party heritage which places emphasis on personal and communal responsibility for the formation of cohesive families and communities. These commentators contrast New Labour's emphasis on services defined by the state rather than services driven by local communities.

Volunteering is, and has been, integral to the BME VCS organisations. While volunteering is not unique to the BME VCS organisations, it has been a significant contributor to the development of the BME VCS because of the powerlessness BME

---

[3] The first event was organised in Sunderland in October 2010 and the second event was organised in Stockton in February 2011.
[4] Norman, J. (2010). *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*. Buckingham: University of Buckingham Press

communities faced during the process of settling in Britain. McLeod et al note[5] that the BME VCS organisations developed with individuals and communities to build collective action in the face of the most severe racism and prejudice.

Research on BME VCS, which is patchy and limited in scope in England, has identified significant contributions that volunteers make to the functioning of small BME organisations and their role in developing relationships in neighbourhoods. Research by the Institute for Volunteering Research found that 'among people from BME groups volunteering was common, but was often undertaken on an informal basis. It was not volunteering itself that was exclusive, but certain kinds of formal activity'.[6]

BECON's own research identifies that a large number of BME organisations provide services through volunteers.[7] In a sample of 20 BME organisations, respondents reported a total of 240 volunteers, excluding management committee members. Of these organisations, three organisations provided employability services solely with volunteers while three other organisations provided employability services with both employed workers and volunteers. In addition, campaign work on race equality has historically has been carried out largely through volunteers, and funding for BME organisations has been a fairly recent phenomenon.[8]

BME VCS organisations in the North East region have continued to rely on volunteers to develop and deliver their work. BECON's research in 2010 identified that almost 36% of BME organisations in our sample were wholly dependent on volunteers to provide employment support to members. Due to the size of the sector in the region and the beneficiaries it serves, this leaves fewer organisations with any paid capacity to offer services to beneficiaries. In addition, the average number of staff for most BME VCS organisations in our research was less than one full time worker. This is certainly not ideal when organisations are required to become increasingly involved in competition to secure funds in order to deliver public services.

In addition, there were concerns from participants in our consultation sessions about whether local authorities would be willing to extend support to BME communities to

---

[5] McLeod, M. et al (2001). *Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Organisations: Their Role and Future Development in England and Wales*. London: Policy Studies Institute

[6] Institute for Volunteering Research. *Volunteering for All: Exploring the Link Between Volunteering and Social Exclusion*. Available on http://www.ivr.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/DA958DB4-FDF8-4943-AA26-C9C9B202A34B/0/fullreport.pdf

[7] BECON (2010). *Impact of Economic Recession on BME Voluntary and Community Organisations in the North East*. Reading along with the report McLeod, M. et al (2001). *Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Organisations: Their Role and Future Development in England and Wales*. London: Policy Studies Institute and Voice4Change England report *Bridge the Gap: What is Known About the BME Third Sector in England*, it is the case that BME organisations rely on volunteers because of the discrimination they face in accessing funding.

[8] See 'Catching History on the Wing: A Conference Report', *Race and Class*, 50 (3): 90-93 and Sivanandan, A. (2009). 'Catching History on the Wing: Conference Speech', *Race and Class*, 50 (5): 94-98. These two articles discuss the role of Black activists and of the Institute of Race Relations in the UK's race equality movement. For a discussion on funding for BME organisations, see McLeod, M. et al. (2001). *Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Organisations: Their Role and Future Development in England and Wales*. London: Policy Studies Institute. Unfortunately, since the study by McLeod et al (2001), there has been no comprehensive national research on funding available to BME VCS organisations.

volunteer. For example, a participant from North Tyneside discussed the outreach work carried out in the area to reach out to BME communities and increase their involvement in developing the local community strategy. Speaking from personal experience, they argued that the outreach work funded by the local authority helped BME communities out of the isolation that they faced in North Tyneside.

Citizenship and Integration
This is a curious aspect of the Big Society programme, from the view point of BME communities, primarily because the struggle for BME VCS organisations has been to attain equal citizenship rights for people from BME communities. The idea included in the Conservative Party Manifesto that 'everyone should play a part in making their communities stronger' suggests that some people do not play their part. However, the Government's other policy programmes on asylum and immigration, can have a negative impact on the Government's alleged intention to involve everyone in decision-making. Research has also demonstrated that the voices of BME communities remain at the margins of decision-making at a local level and in national government.[9]

It is less well known that Commonwealth citizens who came to Britain soon after the Second World War, to participate in the reconstruction process, had legal rights to settle in Britain.[10] Therefore, the campaign and struggle for racial equality which led to the development of the Race Relations Act in 1976 was premised on eliminating discrimination and ensuring equal access to citizenship rights. Despite advancements in legislation, debate and struggle for equal citizenship rights continues, albeit in an altered context.

One element of the Big Society programme in the Conservative Party Manifesto is the National Citizen Service. The stated aim of the programme is to

> *provide a programme for 16 year olds to give them a chance to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens, mix with people from different backgrounds, and start getting involved in their communities.*

As 'communities' is not clearly defined in the Manifesto, it is difficult to gauge what the aim actually implies. However, it does raise questions as to whether the intention of this programme is to improve 'integration' based on the notion of geographical communities as identity based communities hardly find any mention in the Manifesto. Clearly, the assumption is made here that people from different backgrounds do not mix together, a view taken by the Ted Cantle's report after riots in Northern England cities in 2001.[11] This area requires further attention as the National Citizen Service programme develops.

---

[9] BTEG and Urban Fourm (2007). *Participation and Local Strategic Partnerships, A Research Project for the Commission for Racial Equality.*
[10] See Sivanandan, A. (2009). 'Catching History on the Wing: Conference Speech', *Race and Class*, 50 (5): 94-98. Sivanandan notes that in 1948, when Britain needed labour to participate in post-war reconstruction, the government introduced the Nationality Act 1948 granting British nationality to colonials. This changed in 1962 when the demand for labour subsided and the government brought in a series of restrictive and racist immigration acts.
[11] Cantle, T. (nd.). *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*. Home Office

Social Action and Self-Help Groups

Social action and the development of self-help groups have been the hallmarks of the work of the BME VCS in Britain.[12] Available research on the BME VCS notes that such groups have provided essential services (from immigration advice to support on employment) to BME communities where no services existed, or members faced exclusion and discrimination.[13] Therefore, the history of the BME VCS is an example of good practice for any programme on 'self-help'.

However, these groups have always worked in the context of power, which is rarely discussed in policy programmes that seek to implement the Big Society agenda. For example, the Localism Bill 2010 gives power to local communities to challenge planning decisions. Similarly, the community right to challenge will allow organisations to challenge a public service on the services it delivers. However, there does not seem to be safeguards to support minority communities or minority voices to be heard on situations that may negatively affect their lives and livelihoods.[14] In effect, it places significant powers in the hands of local authorities to mediate between different, and at times, conflicting demands placed on them by local communities. Since no central oversight exists of local authorities, we expect a great deal of unevenness to how local authorities will implement their statutory duty on race equality.

It is our experience, and the experiences of participants of the two consultation sessions, that in areas where BME communities are small in number in the region, local authorities tend to ignore how policy planning and implementation impacts on BME communities. One East Midlands noted similar experiences for BME communities. The report notes, 'BME communities in rural areas…..are further affected by isolation, underdeveloped cultural awareness and distance from specialist support services. As demographically, racial minorities account for such a small percentage of the population in rural areas………the ability to influence local priorities is limited' (p. 39).[15]

There was recognition in BECON's events that BME communities were participating in local decision-making, however funding uncertainty meant that there could not be long-term interventions in local areas. Some participants argued that in a situation where public services did not historically engage with BME communities, it was unrealistic to expect their participation in a year or so. This will become harder with limited funding available for specialist interventions.

---

[12] See Brah, A. (1988). 'Journey to Nairobi'. In Grewal, S et al (eds). *Charting the Journey. Writings by Black and Third World Women*. London: Sheba Feminist Publishers Pp. 74-88. Also see, Sivanandan, A. (1982). 'Grunwick'. In Sivanandan, A. (ed.) *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance*. London: Pluto Press Pp. 126-131

[13] McLeod, M. et al (2001). *Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Organisations: Their Role and Future Development in England and Wales*. London: Policy Studies Institute

[14] Here it might be useful to reflect on the ban in Switzerland on the construction of minarets. The powers given to local communities to call for referenda do not appear to provide counter balance to protect civic, political, religious and economic rights of minorities. Also, In its publication, *Our Big Society: Voluntary Work and Community Action* (2010), One East Midland notes, 'The adverse effect of the localism agenda and Big Society on women in particular has been widely commented on…….Women from racial minority groups have traditionally suffered multiple discrimination and many BME women find themselves unable to influence or contribute to decision making processes in their local areas'. (p. 39)

[15] One East Midlands (2010). *Our Big Society: Voluntary Work and Community Action*

One important element of social action in the Big Society programme is the training of community organisers. The Cabinet Office describes the programme as:[16]

> Community Organisers will be well-trained and committed individuals who will play a major role in delivering the Big Society. They will work closely with communities to identify local leaders, projects and opportunities, and empower the local community to improve their local area. Up to five hundred senior Community Organisers will be trained and given bursaries of £20,000 for their first year, along with a further 4500 part-time and voluntary organisers who will support them. The Community Organisers programme is about catalysing community action at a neighbourhood level – 'igniting the impulse to act'. They will help their communities to take advantage of other key Big Society initiatives such as 'Right to Buy' community assets, and the 'Right to Bid' to run public services

Locality, a national organisation formed after the merger of British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac) and Development Trust Association (DTA), was successful in securing the tender to deliver this £15 million national programme. This programme not only includes training of community organisers but also the development of a training framework, code of conduct for community organisers, and an Institute for Community Organising. Locality is working with nine other organisations and will develop ten pilots across England – however, there is no pilot area for the North East of England.

Entrepreneurship
In this section, our focus is on the 'culture of entrepreneurship' that the Coalition Government wants to foster in communities in Britain. This culture change is not only being thought for businesses but also for voluntary and community organisations. This section reflects on the basis of available evidence and BECON's work in the North East what this change would mean for BME communities whether running their businesses or involved in running VCS organisations with an intention to develop social enterprises.

There is a lack of research on businesses managed and run by Black and Minority Ethnic communities across Britain in general and the North East in particular. A report by Runnymede Trust published in 2008, *Financial Inclusion and Ethnicity: An Agenda for Research and Policy Action*, noted that 'despite growing research and policy agendas aimed at tackling financial exclusion, there is virtually no research, data collection and analysis on levels and experiences of financial exclusion by ethnicity;'[17]

The research available demonstrates equal or higher levels of entrepreneurial activities in BME communities in comparison to the white population in proportion to

---

[16] See http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/government-names-new-partner-deliver-community-organisers

[17] Runnymede Trust (2008):*Financial Inclusion and Ethnicity: An Agenda for Research and Policy Action*, available from http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/Summaries/Fin%20incl%20ethnicity%20summary%20Nov%2008%20FPF.pdf
Also see Runnymede Trust (2010). *Seeking Sound Advice: Financial Inclusion and Ethnicity*. http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/SeekingSoundAdvice-2010.pdf

their population, except for people from African or African-Caribbean backgrounds.[18] There are an estimated 275,000 BME small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the UK contributing an estimated £20 bn to the economy per year. This amounts to almost 5% of total SME GVA (£369 bn), and BME businesses make up almost 6% of all SMEs in the country.[19]

This is not surprising, as self-employment in Britain has not only helped BME people overcome racial discrimination in employment but it has also become an important instrument to improve the financial conditions of households. This surge in entrepreneurship was initially funded with money raised within the community. Despite the fact that individuals from BME communities may have flourishing businesses, research has found continuing difficulties to obtain credit from banks[20] with studies documenting problems in raising commercial loans and other forms of credit from high street banks.

Development of Islamic banking in the UK has provided an alternative to some members of the Muslim community from high street banks. As religious Muslims do not wish to accept or pay interest for loans of money, this development fulfils their religious needs. However, we have not come across any evidence of its uptake in the North East region[21] and Islamic banking only caters for the needs of Muslim community in the UK.

One of the consequences of this is that businesses in BME communities continue to rely on financial support from their extended family or friends in the local community. The inability to raise credit from banks outweighs any advantage businesses may have in raising credit from family. In addition, research has found barriers to BME businesses obtaining appropriate insurance cover and of customer resistance from some white people. Available research has suggested that this resistance spills over into violence with Chinese take away owners, South Asian restaurant staff and Pakistani taxi drivers considered particularly vulnerable.[22] This creates additional challenges for BME owned and run businesses.

In one of BECON's events on Race and Religious Hate Crime, the issue of violence and criminality faced by BME businesses and the strategies they adopt was discussed in detail. It was found that there were huge implications for the general well-being of the business owners and workers. The government's strategy on improving entrepreneurial culture in Britain should address these long standing problems that businesses, especially BME businesses, face regularly. Although, the Coalition Government's Programme for Government highlights specific areas of work with BME

---

[18] Barclays. (2005). *Black and Ethnic Minority Business Owners: A Market Research Perspective*.

[19] Department for Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. (2009) *Ethnic Minority Enterprise*.

[20] See Ram M, Jones T, (2008). 'Ethnic-minority businesses in the UK: A Review of Research and Policy Developments" *Government and Policy* 26(2): 352-74

[21] BECON sought information from Islamic banks in 2010 on number of people accessing their services. This enquiry was made to provide information to a meeting jointly organised by One North East and the Government Office North East on financial inclusion. We were unable to receive information on individuals and businesses accessing finance from the North East.

[22] See Ram M, Jones T, (2008). 'Ethnic-minority businesses in the UK: A Review of Research and Policy Developments" *Government and Policy* 26(2): 352-74

communities,[23] especially businesses, there is little information as yet to how this would be achieved. BME businesses constitute a significant part of SMEs in the country and, if supported they could be in a position to significantly contribute to rebalancing the country's economy.

Looking at supporting VCS to develop social enterprises, proposals on the Big Society Bank, as the wholesale bank to support VCS organisations and social enterprises, do not build confidence within the VCS organisations in general and BME VCS organisations in particular, on the effectiveness of loans. For example, the evaluation of a project on a sustainable future for the BME VCS organisations that BECON ran in Tyne and Wear between 2008-2009 demonstrated willingness amongst BME organisations to consider alternatives to grants as the principle means of service delivery to their members. However, these organisations were starting from a low skills and resource base and had comparatively little capital. There has, moreover, been a lack of investment in the sector, and in our experience, mainstream organisations have largely neglected BME organisations. There is evidence that demonstrates low propensity of Ethnic Minority Businesses to utilise mainstream business support providers.[24]

It is unsurprising that the current situation is uneven, and competition within the sector to bid for public services will be detrimental to the sustainability of BME organisations. This aspect came out strongly in our consultations, where participants recognised that an emphasis on contracting for future funding will severely limit the future sustainability of BME organisations, primarily because of the low skills and financial base that most BME VCS organisations work within which will marginalises them in terms of the contracting process.

In its report, the Federation for Community Development Learning notes that there was paucity of information on the training and learning needs of BME workers in the VCS. The report cites a survey carried out by VOICE East Midlands which claimed that 10% or at least 3000 workers were employed by BME VCS organisations. The report further notes that this demonstrated a significant number of workers, of whom virtually nothing is known about their specific skills and developmental needs. The report cites research that highlights barriers to training as a key concern for BME workers, for example, the Futureskills report (2003) which highlighted that small organisations, which made up a significant percentage of the sector required multi-skilled staff.[25]

---

[23] "We will promote improved community relations and opportunities for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, including by providing internships for under-represented minorities in every Whitehall department and funding a targeted national enterprise mentoring scheme for BAME people who want to start a business." http://programmeforgovernment.hmg.gov.uk/equalities/index.html
[24] See Ram M, Jones T, (2008). 'Ethnic-minority businesses in the UK: A Review of Research and Policy Developments" *Government and Policy* 26(2): 352-74
[25] Federation for Community Development Learning (2007). Research into the Training and Learning Needs of Black and Minority Ethnic Workers Employed in Local Infrastructure Organisations. The report is available from http://www.fcdl.org.uk/projects/BMEWorkersResearch2007/Documents/BME_workers_research_2007.pdf

Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure

VCS infrastructure in the region received increased government support during the last ten years of the New Labour government. This investment was premised on the government's intention to improve engagement between the public sector organisations and voluntary and community sector organisations in order to shape the development of public services.

This support was certainly crucial for the BME voluntary and community sector, which had not received much support in the past. In 2001, a report by McLeod et al[26] found that while BME communities constituted almost 9 per cent of the total population in England, they only received 3 per cent of total charitable and government funding for VCS organisations.[27] In the North East, the sector was further marginalised and there was little inward investment to the development of support structures for BME organisations. A national programme of government investment resulted in the establishment of BECON in the North East. Over the last ten years, BECON has worked with organisations in the sector, partners and allies, to build the capacity of organisations in the region. BECON added a layer of responsibility to developing outreach work with the sector. This work was largely supported by independent funding organisations and not government.

In October 2010, the Office for Civil Society released a consultation document entitled *Supporting the Stronger Civil Society*. However, there were already indications from the government on lower infrastructure investment over the next few years. Moreover, as the regional government collapsed, it became clear to BECON, and other infrastructure organisations, that they had to reflect on their role. Our two consultation sessions therefore included discussions on whether the BME VCS organisations still needed outreach based infrastructure support in the region and in the localities. Overwhelmingly the response from organisations was that they appreciated the support that they had received so far from regional and local infrastructure and felt that the Big Society programme would fail BME communities if this support structure was allowed to end.[28]

The government's proposals in its consultation document *Supporting the Stronger Civil Society* does not fill BECON with hope. In our response[29] to the consultation document, based on our discussions with BECON members, and also drawing information from the first consultation event on the Big Society, we identified the need for a local service for BME organisations instead of national, online infrastructure support. The evaluation of the regional networks fund carried out for Capacitybuilders found that eight funded BME networks specified equalities issues as their key policy area targets for the RNF. The report also found that the BME networks often brought a greater reach to BME communities and were able to present more focussed consultation on race-specific inequalities. Similarly, BME networks were able to

---

[26] McLeod, M. et al (2001). *Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Organisations: Their Role and Future Development in England and Wales*. London: Policy Studies Institute

[27] This need was continued to be noted in the Compact documents developed in 2001 as well as the Cross cutting review by the treasury in 2004.

[28] Please see BECON's report from the consultation on BECON website http://www.becon.org.uk/images/stories/Publications/Reports/BECON___SBEN_BIG_Society_report_Oct_2010.pdf

[29] BECON response is available on BECON website http://www.becon.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=85&Itemid=188

provide more focussed support and capacity building to the BME VCS to engage them in policy issues and civil society.[30]

Although we advocate for targeted investment in BME local and regional infrastructure support, keeping in mind evidence of the value added by the sector, we are also aware that investment in infrastructure in general and in the BME infrastructure in particular, will decline in the coming years. While the investment from the public sector declines, there is also limited indication from private foundations on investing in local and regional infrastructure. This task now largely rests with local authorities, who themselves are facing significant financial constraints. BME regional and BME local infrastructure organisations are entering very uncertain times where the future sustainability of these organisations is also unclear.

Conclusion

As the Big Society programme is based on the notion of responsibility, we must consider how both citizens and the state are fulfilling their respective responsibilities. This policy paper demonstrates that the BME VCS has played an important part in the civic, cultural, and economic life of Britain despite significant challenges of racism and powerlessness. In this way, the sector has demonstrated its commitment towards developing a cohesive and equal society in Britain. However, this does not preclude the responsibility of the state from removing barriers where they exist for its citizens even when resources are limited. This is a challenge thrown out by the Big Society programme for the BME VCS nationally. For example, the Office for Civil Society has continued to invest resources in its Strategic Partners programme. However the programme does not include a single equality organisation as a partner.[31] In our view, the state has in this regard demonstrably marginalised equality organisations, especially race equality organisations, paying little consideration to the impact on equality organisations and marginalised communities.

Our discussions with BME VCS organisations and our reading of the available literature on Big Society suggest that there are real challenges for BME VCS organisations, as well as BME communities. We believe that while the Big Society programme may have philosophical and political coherence, it does not take into account the needs of minority communities who already face multiple barriers to access public services and disengagement from political and decision-making processes. Moreover, as the government proposes to reduce investment in the BME VCS infrastructure, BME organisations, who already face challenges to bid for public service contracts will face further marginalisation.

Recommendations

1. There is a lack of evidence at the local and regional level on the needs of BME communities. Additional resources are needed for collection of evidence which will enable BME VCS organisations to be able to participate, both in the shaping of public services and their delivery. BECON, in partnership with the Policy and

---

[30] *Evaluation of the Regional Networks Fund, Paper 4: Making Action on Equalities Issues Central to Policy.* Available from http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/index.cfm?format=848

[31] Recently, the Office for Civil Society has commissioned Voice4Change England to advice on its Big Society initiative. For further information see http://www.voice4change-england.co.uk/content/voice4change-england-commissioned-advise-office-civil-society

representation Partnership, will organise a round-table discussion with appropriate stakeholders to discuss the way forward on developing evidence.
In addition to problems of capacity, frontline BME VCS organisations struggle with finding an appropriate evidence base on issues related to BME communities in localities. With localism, the need to provide adequate data becomes increasingly important for shaping and delivering appropriate services as well as monitoring outcomes for BME communities, especially as in many instances data for BME communities is unavailable at a local level.

2. The identification of a lead officer (at a locality level) within the local authority to lead on liaising on the changing policy landscape and to be a single point of contact for VCS.
Frontline BME VCS organisations generally work with relatively fewer financial resources and rely heavily on volunteers.[32] From our work with BME organisations, we know that organisations constantly face problems in identifying a suitable officer responsible for a particular area of work within a local authority. This problem is further compounded for organisations that support people who have recently arrived in the country. With the Big Society programme, there will be an increased need to engage with local authorities. Therefore a single point of contact within local authorities on Big Society will ease, to an extent, the engagement of BME VCS organisations with the programme. This practice already exists in some local authorities in the region and this practice can be replicated in other local authorities.

3. Transparent mechanism to be established that assesses the impact of changes in public service delivery with specific reference to VCS organisations and private companies as deliverers of public services
As the government seeks greater involvement from the private sector and VCS organisations in the delivery of public services, there needs to be a clear mechanism in place to assess the impact of services delivered by a non-public body on BME communities in a locality.

One East Midlands notes in its report that, 'there appears to be no safeguards in place to ensure vulnerable and marginalised groups will be provided for in terms of equality of access to public services. There is a risk of service providers merely focusing on those who are able to access services with relative ease and not considering those who would benefit most and who are not currently engaged. A lack of culturally sensitive homelessness or health services may disproportionately affect BME women and young people'.[33] (p. 38)

Currently, public bodies have a duty through equality legislation to monitor that its services are accessible to all protected groups. In the absence of Comprehensive Area Assessments or similar oversight on outcomes achieved, it is important that VCS and private sector contractors must report how they meet legislative requirements on monitoring impact of their services for different equality groups on a public website, such as a local authority website. This mechanism can look at services accessed by

---

[32] See McLeod, M. et al (2001). *Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Organisations: Their Role and Future Development in England and Wales*. London: Policy Studies Institute. Also see BECON (2010). *Impact of Economic Recession on BME Voluntary and Community Organisations in the North East*.
[33] One East Midlands (2010). *Our Big Society: Voluntary Work and Community Action*

different communities in a local authority area and report on the eight areas which encompass freedom and capabilities as identified by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.[34] Such a mechanism will allow frontline organisations and individuals to understand how local services are being provided and whether these services meet legislative requirements, especially around race equality.

4. Identification of resources for local and regional BME infrastructure support to ensure the continuation of participation and engagement of BME communities.

While there is some criticism of investment in infrastructure support to frontline voluntary and community organisations, BECON's research in 2010, the Big Lottery research,[35] the evaluation of Regional Networks Fund and our two consultation events with BME VCS organisations demonstrates that the BME VCS still needs continuing support to be able to effectively participate in local decision-making. This is primarily due to the continued marginal role the sector plays in the region and the historical low investment in BME organisations. BME organisations face additional barriers, for example, Refugee Community Organisations may be distrustful of state institutions. These organisations may also be unaware of local services and networks and work with people with multiple and at times complex needs. Similarly, several organisations working with the Muslim community feel under greater scrutiny due to the national and international climate of Islamophobia.

Continued participation and engagement of BME communities can only be made possible through investment in local and regional infrastructure provision. In its written submission to the Public Administration committee on Big Society, Voice4Change England notes the specialist infrastructure organisations developed due to the failure of generic services to meet the needs of BME VCS. The submission also notes the role played by specialist infrastructure organisations in achieving Big Society objectives.[36]

In its publication, One East Midlands notes 'BME communities are already suffering disadvantage and the mainstreaming agenda has led to the withdrawal of many BME specific support services, particularly within the VCS. Most BME specific organisations directly support community voice and influence, develop and support BME volunteering and deliver tailored services to meet local needs. The loss of funding for BME infrastructure will directly impact on the ability of BME groups to engage with the Big Society approach' (p. 39).[37]

In our view, the proposals developed by the Office of Civil Society on the future of infrastructure support in the document entitled *Supporting a Stronger Civil Society* are misguided for they are reliant on infrastructure support by national organisations with

---

[34] EHRC. (2010). *How Fair is Britain, The First Triennial Review.*

[35] *Organisational Development Needs of Third Sector Groups that Serve Communities of Interests.* The report notes that average BME group funding was smaller than most VCS organisations, that BME organisations were largely restricted to working with their own communities and that intelligence about BME groups was inadequate.

[36] The submission is available at http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpubadm/writev/smaller/bs35.htm

[37] One East Midlands (2010). *Our Big Society: Voluntary Work and Community Action*

little local reach and will significantly damage the infrastructure support (both local and regional) available for the BME VCS organisations.

5. As the Big Society Bank has been mandated to develop the capacity of organisations, it is important that the Bank develops relationship with BME VCS and supports its capacity building

Based on our engagement with frontline BME organisations, we hold the view that the Big Society Bank[38] with its current mandate and financial arrangements will prove ineffective for BME organisations in the North East. In 2008-o9, BECON delivered a project in Tyne and Wear sub-region to address sustainability issues of BME VCS organisations and social enterprises. We found that BME social enterprises were also looking for grants from foundations and government agencies instead of looking to raise finances from the market on interest. These organisations and social enterprises are starting from a low resource, low capital and low skills base and feel that they will struggle to accept market conditions, especially the duration of a loan and interest charged. Most BME VCS organisations work with people already marginalised and have limited opportunities to charge for their services. Since these market conditions will also be used by the Big Society Bank, it is our view that a large part of the BME VCS sector will be unable to access finances from the Bank. In addition, the Big Society Bank, due to its mandate to charge interest on its loans, will exclude several organisations primarily run by Muslim communities in the North East. These organisations are not keen to participate in accepting loans as this requires paying interest on the capita. Paying interest on loan is against the religious teachings of Islam for devout Muslims.

6. The development of a targeted service to capture and support the enthusiasm in the sector in developing enterprise, as mainstream services are too distant and do not cater to the needs of BME businesses. Targeted support to BME SME's and social enterprises so that they become a part of public service delivery and a diverse supplier base

National research[39] and our experience in the region, demonstrate that mainstream organisations providing services on procurement and commissioning do not generally reach BME VCS organisations. There is a lack of understanding of the skills and financial base from which a large part of the BME VCS organisations operate. Similarly, there is little interaction between BME VCS organisations and commissioners. Discussing the role BME organisations can play in delivery of appropriate and sensitive services, One East Midlands notes, 'Procurement processes must give adequate weighting to knowledge, understanding and ability to engage with BME beneficiaries to ensure that service delivery is appropriate and accessible'. (p. 38). [40]

---

[38] The Big Society Bank has been mandated to develop intermediaries in the capital market as well as invest in capacity building of organisations. In fact, the Bank can invest directly in new social organisations to develop capacity. In this context, it is important that the Bank also caters to the needs of BME communities.

[39] Please see Blackburn, R and Odamtten, T (2004). *Empowering Community Organisations to Support BME Businesses: Case Studies from North London*.

[40] One East Midlands (2010). *Our Big Society: Voluntary Work and Community Action*

National research[41] also demonstrates that while all small enterprises face similar challenges, small businesses led by people from BME communities face additional challenges, ranging from lack of credit to racially motivated violence in their day to day operations. This is prominent in taxi and small retail trades, therefore, BME small enterprises need specialist support to help them gain confidence in institutions so that they can improve and expand their businesses.

7. The programme to train community organisers needs clarity and requires participation of local and regional infrastructure to inform BME VCS organisations and BME communities

The programme to train 5,000 Community organisers can prove to be an important programme, leading to increased participation of activists from BME communities. However, there is a great deal of confusion and a lack of information about the programme within BME communities based on our discussions at Newcastle BME Network's event in Newcastle (March 2011).

As organisations involved in Community Organisers programme are national organisations, their reach to local and regional BME organisations must be looked at. The need to interact with local BME VCS has been identified by One East Midlands, their publication notes 'Community leadership can be a complex and political issue in many BME communities. The appointment of community advocates must be approached cautiously, with the need to ensure community accountability…..It is important that the skills and knowledge of specialist BME support organisations are sought in order to navigate community tensions and issues without causing disengagement or discrimination' (p. 38). Although Locality and its partner organisations can engage with BME communities in localities without engaging with regional and local BME organisations, it is our view that, as local and regional organisations are closer to communities they need to be involved in the Community Organisers programme. We believe that engagement with local communities can be achieved better in discussions with organisations that have experience of working with local communities.

It is as yet unclear who will facilitate the engagement of frontline groups with a national programme. At a time when the Coalition Government is increasingly changing policy and the regulatory climate, BME local and regional infrastructure is struggling to cope with demands placed on it by frontline BME VCS organisations, especially around supporting their members who are facing challenging times due to the present economic challenges.[42]

---

[41] London Development Agency (2005). *Redefining London's BME Owned Businesses*,
[42] BECON (2010). *Impact of Economic Recession on BME Voluntary and Community Organisations in the North East*.

BECON

Black Minority Ethnic Community Organisations Network

Delivering diversity and working for equality

Newcastle Office (Head Office)   Tees Valley & Durham Office
34 Grainger Park Road   98 Dovecot Street
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE4 8RY   Stockton-on-Tees, TS18 1HA
Telephone: 0191 2722339

E-mail: information@becon.org.uk website: www.becon.org.uk

A company limited by guarantee registered in England no: 4329582
Registered Charity no: 1094993

Supported by
The National Lottery®
through the Big Lottery Fund

BIG LOTTERY FUND

Policy&Representation Partnership