



## BAME Sub-regional Networks

### Supporting London's sub-regional BAME infrastructure Networks

#### Background to sub-regional networks

During 2006, for a six month period, MiNet were funded to lead with the initial development and administration of five sub-regional infrastructure networks across London for the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). The emergence of and requirement for these networks evolved from a gap in existing provision for BAME communities which manifests itself in a number of ways. It is well known that many BAME VCS groups experience a lot of challenges growing and developing into strong vibrant organisations; inability to access funding, not plugged into structures to enable them to network effectively, being offered inappropriate capacity building activities and ultimately being unable to influence policy in areas which affect them.

The apparent need for infrastructure support for VCS organisations was acknowledged in 2004 within the Home Office's strategy for infrastructure, "ChangeUP", which stated:

*"by 2014 the needs of frontline voluntary and community organisations will be met by support which is available nationwide, structured for maximum efficiency, offering excellent provision which is accessible to all while reflecting and promoting diversity, and is sustainably funded." (Home Office, 2004, p.7)*

A number of reports have highlighted the specific needs of BAME VCS organisations, including Needham, drawing attention to the limited infrastructural support they have available and the inadequate opportunities to build the capacity of their organisations. HEAR's Gaps and Solution report in 2008 also draws similar findings. Opportunities for BAME VCS to network and for infrastructure bodies to encourage and facilitate partnerships have been shortcoming. For these reasons, and the growing need to engage with some key structures which operate at the sub-regional level, the creation of sub-regional networks was seen as a greater enabler to give capacity to local based BAME organisations to participate, and to engage in decision making processes.

The creation of sub-regional BAME networks was thought to go some way to addressing the imbalance experienced in the dichotomous relationship between BAME and mainstream VCS organisations, allowing the chance for BAME groups to be an equal stakeholder at local and sub-regional level. Funding from ChangeUp provided the means for the initial foundations to be built and for existing sub-regional structures to be further developed, and it was partly the responsibility thereafter of the network, and to some extent MiNet, to unlock funding to ensure the sustainability of the sub-regional networks.

## Sub-regional Network Development

South London was the first sub-region to receive support and assistance in developing a BAME VCS infrastructure and viewed at the time as a pilot project. Further, it was the successful implementation, and general acceptance, responsibilities and leadership taken by BAME groups which contributed to the progressiveness of the south London sub-region, which therefore informed the development of the other four sub-regions. Although it was the objective to replicate the methods applied within the south London sub-region onto the other sub-regions, the outcomes were somewhat mixed. For instance, in the north sub-region it appeared BAME groups struggled to take ownership for the network arguably due to a lack of funds and capacity. Similar stories emerged from the east sub-region where any progress was limited and questions were raised over the clarity of what was to be achieved from the project. Whilst in west London, although the embryo of the network was already developed, and stakeholders were keen for the network to grow, it was reported that concerns remained over the strength of the network with a disproportionate number of refugee 2<sup>nd</sup> tier organisations involved in the partnership.

## The Present Situation

The picture of the sub-regional networks at present is a mixed one, with two sub-regional networks (South and West) still active and three other sub-regional networks (East, North and Central) inactive, when considered against the mould from which they were set up. Despite what were thought to be initial concerns within the west London network, which seemed to be leaned towards refugee groups, this is a network which remains active, though doing well to survive on a yearly budget of £2000. The Southall Community Alliance, along with their partners, have been intrinsic in directing the West London network due to their belief in the importance sub-regional BAME infrastructure holds in representing the needs and concerns of the VCS at this level. Similar can be said of the role that Croydon BME Forum has adopted along with partners in guiding and keeping the South London sub-regional network active. Members of the south London sub-regional partnership are presently involved in setting up two local borough BAME networks within the south London sub region which will offer voice at the borough level to be fed in sub-regionally

The picture in West and South London is a contrast from that in the East, North and Central sub-regions where there appears to have been little continuity from the structures that were set up as part of ChangeUp programme. The reasons for the

apparent dissolution of the networks in East, Central and North London are varied with evident issues around funding and capacity, but also suggestions that a sense of ownership failed to be created to any significant level.

## The need to Strengthen BAME infrastructure sub-regionally

The noticeable increase in civic activity and growth of BAME VCS organisations during the 1980s occurred due largely to carnivorous gap in service provision and a limited BAME voice. Concerns are looming that we face falling back to a situation where BAME groups will have to argue their position and need, particularly at a time when the Single Equality Bill is upon us and also whilst there is a belief and fear amongst many BAME groups that their interests have been diluted, as they have become subsumed within the remit of the mainstream VCS. Within this climate and to prevent the cyclical motion there is evidently greater need to coordinate and offer specific representation for BAME groups.

Some local authorities (LA) have recognised and acted upon evidence to offer specific support for local BAME 2<sup>nd</sup> tier infrastructure organisations and have dedicated funding for this to take place, Havering and Islington are examples of this across London. Notwithstanding the concerns of creating a forum which is dependent upon LA funding and also issues surrounding actual autonomy, the potential to feed in concerns from a local to sub-regional level and thereon to the regional have not been fully seized.

There are many structures BAME groups need to be engaging with, operating locally and sub-regionally, and evidently more support is needed to support this particularly at the latter level, where BAME representation is inconsistent. Whilst not ignoring the inherent difficulties which can be expected in the sub-regions were networks survive carrying out resource intensive work on a small budget.

To fulfil its role in advocating and promoting the work and needs of the BAME third sector, MiNet over the next two years will be involved in representing London's sub-regional BAME networks where they exist, and strengthening and developing key sub-regional stakeholders where they do not exist. Additionally, it will also be a primary focus of MiNet's work to coordinate more closely with Racial Equality Councils (REC's), and take forward their concerns at the regional level, whilst identifying their needs to allow for meaningful capacity building and development.

MiNet recently had their funding confirmed from CapacityBuilders which will contribute towards activities and running of MiNet for at least the next two years. To meet the criteria set by CapacityBuilders, by 2011 MiNet's should be able to demonstrate increased influence over regional and national policy affecting the third sector, and regional third sector networks should be able to demonstrate improvements in their leadership, income diversity and efficiency. To help achieve these outcomes a new MiNet Advisory Group has been recruited and met 30<sup>th</sup> April [http://www.rota.org.uk/pages/MiNet\\_AdGroup.aspx](http://www.rota.org.uk/pages/MiNet_AdGroup.aspx).

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