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research article

Funding Black-led micro-organisations in England

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This article presents an approach aimed at dealing with the difficulties faced by Black-led micro-organisations in England when accessing longer-term funding. The experiences of Black-led micro-organisations working in partnership with a mainstream organisation and a mid-level minority ethnic organisation are reported in the article. The participants of the research attributed the Black-led micro-organisations' difficulties in accessing funds to institutional racism. To overcome this, the micro-organisations received targeted funding through a partnership that not only makes funding more accessible, but also builds the capacity of the Black-led micro-organisations. This was because a micro-organisation on its own or as a group of micro-organisations would not have been successful in a funding application. The formation of the three-tier partnership came with many challenges, but ultimately with the building of trust by skilled leadership and the right individuals, the Black-led micro-organisations were able to access sustainable long-term funding.

Keywords minoritised ethnic community • Black-led • micro-organisations • funding • partnership

To cite this article: Manful, A. and Willis, R. (2024) Funding Black-led micro-organisations in England, *Voluntary Sector Review*, 15(2): 317–331, DOI: 10.1332/204080521X16644514950625

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed longstanding health and social inequalities in minoritised ethnic communities in England ([Public Health England, 2020](#)). The 'Black Lives Matter' protests in 2020 also generated a lot of interest in racism and social inequalities. Research on the impact of COVID-19 on minoritised community-led organisations highlighted that nine out of 10 organisations could shut down because of funding challenges ([Murray, 2020](#)). In response to public interest and the research findings, funders dedicated emergency funds to organisations serving these communities ([Armitage et al, 2021](#)). Although this was a step in the right direction,

this kind of reactive short-term funding has been partly blamed for the systemic underspending in minoritised community-led organisations and groups. What is needed is the provision of targeted longer-term investment to drive change and bridge the funding gap (Butt, 2001; Craig, 2011). A report published in 2021 by The Ubele Initiative exposed institutional racism in the voluntary sector, which makes it difficult for minoritised community-led organisations and groups to secure funding. Craig (2011: 368) criticised some of the research on the minoritised community voluntary sector for being ‘colour-blind’. That is, when minoritised communities are discussed, it entails drawing out shared experiences rather than specific experiences of the individual groups within the umbrella. Therefore, it is important to identify when a group faces issues that are specific to them, for example the experiences of Black-led organisations. The micro-organisations examined in this article are run by and for Black people with African or Caribbean heritage, hereafter referred to as Black micro-organisations or ‘the micro-organisations’ when discussing our data. The term BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) is used because it was the name of the project. We recognise it is a contested term.

The aim of this article is to discuss how a mainstream charity worked together with Black-led micro-organisations to deal with the challenges in accessing longer-term funding. This involved the provision of targeted funding by means of a partnership model that not only made funding more accessible but also built the capacity of the Black-led micro-organisations.

Ageing Better in Camden

Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) was a partnership of older people and local organisations in Camden, London with the objective of tackling social isolation and loneliness among older people. It aimed to draw on the experience and skills of organisations and older people in Camden to develop effective approaches to encouraging the social connections of older people in the community. ABC was part of Age UK, Camden and one of the 14 National Lottery Community Fund Ageing Better programmes across England, which ran from 2015 to 2022. Two years into the ABC programme, it was apparent that, so far, the approach had not enabled the partnership to engage with smaller minority ethnic communities and groups in Camden. To address this, ABC designed and developed a BAME Community Action Project (CAP) in 2018 to bring together micro-organisations from these communities with the intention that they would grow in strength through partnership and help ‘harder-to-reach’ older people from their communities build connections. This involved the development of a **three-tier partnership** between ABC, a mid-level organisation and seven Black-led micro-organisations in October 2018.

The problem of funding minoritised ethnic community-led micro-organisations

Minoritised community-led micro-organisations typically exist because the client groups they serve are not adequately served by mainstream organisations (Butt, 2001). Most operate at the grassroots and are run by members of the same community that they serve. They therefore share an understanding of the exclusion and discrimination faced by their clients (Murray, 2020). This exclusion and discrimination are perpetuated in the power hierarchies of the voluntary sector and funders. Advocating for the

rights of minority ethnic groups is often an explicit goal of such community-led micro-organisations, beyond simply the provision of a health or social care service (Craig, 2011). In this article, micro-organisations refer to organisations that rely mainly on volunteers and may have no more than one paid staff member with an annual funding of less than £50,000 (Donahue, 2011). Minoritised community-led micro-organisations mostly rely on grants to operate; however, the increasing shift from the provision of grants by funders to the provision of contracts through competitive bidding has made it even more difficult for them to secure funding (Afridi and Warmington, 2009; Craig, 2011). The contract funding culture favours mainstream organisations in the voluntary sector (Tilki et al, 2015).

Harries et al (2020) provide a very clear picture of the difficulties faced by these micro-organisations in trying to obtain funding. Their study of the effects of austerity measures on advocacy, anti-racism and community organising highlighted that there was a strong sense of competition between minoritised community-led organisations and the large, White-led organisations. The latter were seen by the funders as better resourced and therefore better equipped to stay on the funding application treadmill. The micro-organisations found that writing funding applications took up so much time, and having one or a few volunteers, they had no time left to provide the needed services. Furthermore, the priorities of the funders themselves were perceived as opaque, continually shifting and subject to political agendas, which made it difficult for the micro-organisations to know how best to pitch funding applications. In addition, the UK government's austerity measures led these micro-organisations to act as competitors rather than allies in funding applications (Holloway, 2015; Harries et al, 2020).

Blakey et al (2016) reported on an attempt to form a partnership between a large mainstream voluntary organisation (the Alzheimer's Society) and local minoritised community-led organisations to provide culturally adapted dementia support services for South Asian caregivers. The findings demonstrated improved outcomes for the caregivers that could not have been obtained by the mainstream organisation working alone, due to the trust the caregivers had in the South Asian facilitators. The mainstream organisation's understanding of the issues affecting South Asian caregivers was improved by the partnership with the local organisations. Meanwhile the local organisations valued the partnership with the mainstream organisation and found that it unlocked more opportunities for them. They also valued making links with other local organisations. However, there were two local organisations that reported negative experiences of the partnership. Those who worked more closely with the mainstream organisation felt more valued, while others felt they were left to do most of the work without their contribution being recognised. Similar negative findings have been reported by other minority ethnic voluntary organisations on their experience of 'partnership' working with larger charities (Tilki et al, 2015).

Loneliness in older people from minority ethnic communities

Loneliness refers to a subjective feeling of dissatisfaction with either the quality or the quantity of social interactions, while social isolation refers to an objective lack of social contacts (Peplau and Perlman, 1982). Both are related to numerous adverse health outcomes and are the subject of recent government attention. One of the few studies that examined loneliness among older people (aged 65 years and over) from minoritised communities in Britain found much higher rates of those often/

always lonely among African (50 per cent), Pakistani (50 per cent), Bangladeshi (40 per cent), Chinese (40 per cent) and Caribbean (24 per cent) groups, with only the Indian group (8 per cent) having comparable levels to the general population (8–10 per cent) (Victor et al, 2012). There are, however, popular misconceptions about the ageing experience of older people from minoritised communities involving multigenerational households, close-knit extended families and supportive local communities (Katbamna et al, 2004; British Red Cross and Co-op, 2019). Holding such assumptions might lead to the erroneous conclusion that loneliness is less of a problem among these groups. However, as already seen, levels of loneliness are very high among older people from minoritised communities.

Voluntary and community groups play an important role in dealing with loneliness through the delivery of services and activities that help people build and maintain relationships by supporting them (HM Government, 2021). There is, however, an ongoing debate about the benefit of mainstreaming such services to minoritised communities instead of the provision of specialist services to these communities (Chahal and Ullah, 2004; Bowes, 2006; Carlsson and Pijpers, 2021). The arguments for the mainstreaming of services to minority ethnic groups acknowledge that there needs to be collaboration with minoritised community-led micro-organisations to be able to reach their communities and better understand their needs. Whereas community services available to help lonely older people are mainly 'mainstream', minoritised communities may not feel comfortable using a service where every other member is White or if they are not fluent in English (British Red Cross and Co-op, 2019). At the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government launched a £5 million Loneliness COVID-19 Grant Fund to help organisations in the voluntary sector deal with loneliness. While this initiative was positive, all the recipients of the fund were mainstream organisations, with one beneficiary offering services to minoritised communities (HM Government, 2020). This highlights the high possibility that older people from these communities may not have benefited from this funding because of their preference for specialist services (Beattie et al, 2005; Manful, 2021). A review of service provision of dementia care found that services were under-utilised by minoritised communities. This was attributed to several factors including the perception of health and social services as discriminatory or culturally inappropriate; with language barriers particularly for first-generation migrants (Daker-White et al, 2002). The older population in Britain is more ethnically diverse now than it has ever been; however, services offered by mainstream organisations alone are not always viewed as suitable. Mainstream organisations, therefore, need to collaborate more with minoritised community-led micro-organisations to provide tailored services to people from their communities.

Methods

An independent research into the development, implementation and impact of the BAME-CAP project was conducted in 2021. For this research, a qualitative evaluative method was used to examine the ABC partnership and its impact on the older people with whom the organisations worked (Bryman, 2015). Interviews were conducted with the following participants: 14 older people, seven partner leads (PLs) of micro-organisations, four managers and three volunteers. The findings about the outcomes of the intervention for older people are reported elsewhere (Manful, 2021). The findings reported here are drawn from analysis of the interviews with the PLs of the micro-organisations, the managers and the volunteers.

To ensure rigour of the study findings, reflexive steps were carried out as much as possible (Ritchie et al, 2014). These reflexive steps helped to recognise researcher bias and the potential effect on the interpretations given to the responses. It also created an audit trail to enhance trustworthiness in the data and findings (Nowell et al, 2017). The first author was commissioned by ABC to conduct independent research on the BAME-CAP project. She is a first-generation Black African migrant to the UK. Her background helped to establish experiential similarity with the PLs and volunteers, which in turn helped in the trust building needed in research with minority ethnic communities (Sabir and Pillemer, 2014). Ethical approval for the research was given by ABC before the interviews commenced. Participant information sheets and consent forms were used to ensure informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and participants are not identifiable from the study reports. The BAME-CAP project manager acted as gatekeeper to introduce the first author to the PLs, the managers and the mid-level organisation's programme manager. In turn, the PLs shared information about the project with their volunteers. Those who were interested in taking part contacted the first author and interviews were scheduled. A one-off in-depth semi-structured interview was used to allow answers to be probed for clarification while providing structure for the comparison of responses (Jamshed, 2014).

A different interview guide was designed and used for each participant group. All the interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. The PLs and volunteers used a lot of colloquial language and slang during the interviews. The first author, being Black African, understood most of this, and therefore their use by the participants did not negatively affect her understanding of the responses. In the event where the first author was unclear about a phrase, clarification was sought. All interviews were conducted remotely on video-enabled platforms such as Zoom or WhatsApp because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data because it provided a framework to realise the research aims (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The first author read the transcriptions repeatedly while listening to the recordings to immerse herself in the data. NVivo11, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, was used to store, manage and code data into segments (Ritchie et al, 2014). The data were open-coded using both deductive and inductive reasoning based on interesting issues, recurring issues or ideas relating to the research aims, in order to develop initial codes. This ensured that the initial codes were both data-driven and theory-driven. Codes that related to each other with a strong conceptual connection were organised into subcategories. Relationships or linkages between the research aims and the codes were explored to form a coding frame. All the codes were evaluated to understand whether they fitted into the coding frame. The codes that did not fit were evaluated and noted. The frequency of each code on the coding frame was recorded. The codes in the coding frame were re-checked with the whole set of data to ensure validity and robustness. Themes were developed from the coding frame that answered the research aims.

Findings

Three key themes that highlight the need for the provision of targeted longer-term funding of Black-led micro-organisations are presented in this article; first, the accessibility of funding by the Black-led micro-organisations; second, the use of a

partnership model to make funding more accessible; and last, the perceived impact of having access to longer-term funding on the Black-led micro-organisations.

Access to funding

All PLs and managers interviewed spoke of the Black-led micro-organisations' difficulty in securing funding. Prior to their involvement in the ABC project, none of them had paid staff. The micro-organisations depended mainly on volunteers to operate. Most of the funding they had secured in the past had been short-term grants from their local council. However, with the government's austerity measures, most of them lost their funding from the council. Only two organisations had previously won longer-term funding bids despite frequently applying for funding. The PLs attributed their difficulty in winning bids to institutional racism.

Institutional racism

Whereas the term 'institutional racism' was specifically mentioned by only four out of the 14 participants, it could be inferred from the responses provided by all participants.

Two managers and the three volunteers mentioned that the systems that funders put in place to reduce risk tend to end up preventing these small groups from accessing funds. Funders were seen to be data- and figures-driven, which does not align well with the informal micro-organisations, which, generally, had limited data to support their funding applications. The following is a quote from a manager on why the organisations in the partnership struggle to access funding: "[L]ots of funders have systems, which unintentionally, possibly ... but are creating essentially, systemically racist funding. And you know, I'm not suggesting funders themselves are racist." Other inappropriate bidding requirements, such as the availability of reserve funds, inadvertently prevents micro-organisations from accessing mainstream funding programmes. A PL spoke of being told his organisation was unsuccessful in a funding bid because they did not have reserve funds. However, according to the PL, it was a 'chicken and egg' scenario, which was that a small organisation would not be able to build a reserve if it had no opportunity to win funding bids.

Participants including two managers responsible for distributing funds mentioned that funders had negative stereotypical beliefs about Black micro-organisations. These are some of their quotes about funders' negative stereotypical beliefs: "oh well, it'll just be really chaotic"; "we can't manage"; "it's too difficult for them"; "not good with money"; and "they're not run properly". All the PLs reported that funders did not trust them because of these negative stereotypes. In addition, they felt that their work in the community was not appreciated by funders. A PL said: "So, I think that Black organisations, or small organisations, are not appreciated as much as they should be, because the work that we're doing nobody else can do it, but they won't give us the money."

Partnership model

To be able to provide targeted funding to minoritised community-led micro-organisations in Camden, ABC commissioned Voluntary Action Camden (an infrastructure organisation that worked with minority ethnic groups in the borough) to find and support micro-organisations from these communities to form a partnership

and support them to bid for and deliver the project. Following this development work and the subsequent tender process, ABC commissioned a **three-tier partnership** between itself, seven Black-led micro-organisations and a mid-level minority ethnic organisation in October 2018 to tackle loneliness and social isolation in older people from the smaller minority ethnic communities in Camden, as shown in Figure 1. This partnership model was necessary because the micro-organisations on their own and as a group did not meet The National Lottery Community Fund’s (TNLCF) requirements and, therefore, ABC’s requirements. The mid-level organisation, Hopscotch Women’s Centre, which already held a contract with ABC for the Bangladeshi community, had a proven track record of delivering similar projects; they also had a number of paid staff and reserve funds. This capacity and capability meant that they met TNLCF’s requirements, and therefore were made the **lead partner**. They were responsible for managing the contract while the micro-organisations were project **delivery partners** responsible for delivering activities to older people from their communities. The project delivery partners were Umoja Health Forum (formerly African Health Forum), South Sudanese Women Skills Development (SSWSD), African Physical Training Organisation (APTO), Cornerstone Parish (CP), Light of Nations Mission (LNM), Ethiopian Welfare Association (EWA) and Women’s Voices (WV). Umoja Health Forum, the micro-organisation with the biggest capacity and capability among the delivery partners, was chosen as the lead delivery partner and given extra funds to employ a part-time project manager.

Barriers and facilitators of the project

The main factor that hindered the project was lack of trust. The micro-organisations at the start of the project did not trust the partnership model because of previous bad experiences of partnerships, competitive contract-bidding culture and institutional racism. Almost all the PLs were uncomfortable with having to partner with a mid-level organisation to access the funding. The PLs were disappointed that they could not qualify for the contract even as a partnership of Black-led micro-organisations. Some PLs felt that this additional partnership was only needed because of negative stereotypical beliefs about Black organisations.

‘[T]he problem with certain funders is that, especially when it comes to Africa, we have a disadvantage: in that they assume that Africans, if we are applying for resources ourselves by our own selves and there is a mainstream

Figure 1: Partnership structure



too [referring to the mid-level organisation], then they favour them. This is not nice, but that is how the system works. To be successful, you have to have a mainstream organisation as a partner. There is no doubt, institutional discrimination, maybe they think that we might be lacking skills, things like that, but it's not true. No as a matter of fact, it's not true. We can do what other people can do, sometimes better!

The partnership with the mid-level organisation reduced the amount of money that was available to the micro-organisations, heightening their mistrust of the partnership. Although they accepted it, they were frustrated about how they were expected to build capacity if they could not be trusted to manage a contract. One of them said: "I understand why. But again, if I'm not given the chance, how can I handle such a money? Now I'm not given the chance to handle such money, and then on the other hand, I'm being told if I've never handled such money, I cannot be trusted." The micro-organisations were suspicious of each other especially with the allocation of the project funds – they feared that the budget would not be allocated fairly. The competitive contract culture made collaboration between the minority ethnic organisations difficult because of the competition for limited funds (Harries et al, 2020).

ABC's determination to build trust in the partnership was critical to the success of the partnership – an important facilitator. A lot of trust was needed to get all the micro-organisations who were interested in the project to be on the same page and, also, to believe that the partnership with the mid-level organisation was beneficial. This was achieved by ABC being very transparent, especially in budget allocation. ABC's willingness to listen, learn and accommodate the micro-organisations' concerns where possible was another facilitator. For instance, it agreed to the request for the age limit of older people to be lowered from 60 years to 50 years because the PLs highlighted that, in their various cultures, a person in their 50s is considered as an older person. However, reducing the age limit was not only dealing with a cultural issue but also acknowledging the accumulation of disadvantage in minority ethnic communities. Research shows that the ageing process may start earlier among populations from minoritised communities due to the accumulation of disadvantages such as racism, health inequalities, low socioeconomic status and poor living environment over their lifecourse (Sin, 2004; 2006).

Commissioning an infrastructure organisation to help the micro-organisations form the partnership and help put a bid together, including a budget for a project manager and the duration of the funding, were the main facilitators of the project. The Ubele Initiative's report on the impact of COVID-19 on organisations from minoritised communities highlights that the reason for the organisations' difficulties securing funding included that there is a lack of staff time to devote to bid writing, and that it is an unfamiliar time-consuming process (Murray, 2020). The infrastructure organisation supported the micro-organisations through the bidding process and building their capacity. Having a project manager, albeit part-time (from one of the Black-led micro-organisations), who was already well known and trusted in the Black community in Camden was crucial in the success of this project. She was the 'go-to person' for all the PLs and helped the micro-organisations to set up the needed structures and was on hand to help with challenges.

The three-year overall project duration was also vital to the success of the partnership. With this duration all the participants mentioned that the project would

run long enough to make a difference in their communities. They were used to short-term grants that hindered continuity and the tangible impact of the organisations' activities/support work (Harries et al, 2020).

Perceived impact of targeted longer-term funding

The key impact of the provision of targeted funding to the micro-organisations was the ability to reach vulnerable older people from minoritised communities who are usually hard for mainstream organisations to reach and engage (British Red Cross and Co-op, 2019). A manager who spoke about the impact of the project said: "Actually, they've seen a lot of people who we wouldn't have reached otherwise. They do a lot of things with very little money."

All the PLs were grateful to have access to regular longer-term funding. All the micro-organisations previously had difficulty accessing funds, therefore having access to this funding increased their confidence – they felt that their work in the community had been appreciated, which in turn motivated them to continue to serve the communities. The access to regular funding further increased the micro-organisations' capacity, including covering some core operational costs such as hiring a room for activities and recruiting paid staff and additional volunteers. It also enabled the micro-organisations to provide advocacy, counselling, emotional support and signposting to the right agency/authorities. It is generally more difficult to access funding for these types of services; however, micro-organisations usually provide this in tandem with the primary activities they provide (Afridi and Warmington, 2009; Craig, 2011). A PL highlighted how the project had helped them: "So, having paid staff, money coming into the organisation to help the people, read their letters, show them where to go for help, training that we've received, learning from other partners on..."

The targeted longer-term funding increased the micro-organisations' stability. This proved very useful during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project had been going for a year and a half before the pandemic. The 'harder to reach' older people could have fallen through the cracks if these micro-organisations were not already providing regular support to them. They were a lifeline of support to the older people, as discussed in the wider project report (Manful, 2021). The support provided to the older people during the pandemic included the provision of correct information, advocacy, befriending/companionship and shopping for African food, which the older people craved for during the lockdown. A PL explained the importance of providing the correct information in their community, especially during the pandemic:

'You know the African mind, it's like anything is a taboo, even when they got it [COVID-19], they don't want to say. So, we need to work hard to call them, to explain to them if you're not feeling well don't hesitate to call 111, when they ask you to go to the hospital, don't refuse because they will help you, because there was a bad messages going around on WhatsApp. They said when you go to hospital with it, they will kill you.'

Finally, they also developed proven and well-documented experience of delivering funded projects. For example, they persevered through all the challenges the project faced (including the COVID-19 pandemic) to keep the partnership together. In addition to the what has already been described, their continued efforts to help

their communities provided a demonstrable track record, which helped the Black-led partnership to win other funds such as winning a grant from Camden Giving to tackle the digital exclusion faced by older people from minority ethnic communities during the COVID-19 lockdown. After the funding for the BAME-CAP project ended, the partnership secured another three-year contract to carry on with the project without the need for an infrastructure organisation to help with the process.

Discussion

This article reports on the experiences of Black-led micro-organisations working in partnership with a mainstream organisation and a mid-level minority ethnic organisation to provide support services for lonely, older, Black people in Camden. The services were only possible because of the provision of targeted funding through the formation of a partnership. Any one micro-organisation on its own or as a group of micro-organisations would not have been successful in a funding application. The experience of forming the three-tier partnership was not easy, but ultimately, the micro-organisations accessed much-needed funding, the mainstream organisation was able to engage 'harder-to-reach' older people and the mid-level minority ethnic organisation increased their capacity.

Targeted funding as part of the solution for funding Black-led micro-organisations?

The findings in this article echo what is known about barriers that minoritised community-led micro-organisations in UK face when accessing longer-term funding (Butt, 2001; Craig, 2011; Tilki et al, 2015). The shift from the provision of grants by funders to the provision of contracts through complex competitive bidding processes has created a situation where micro-organisations from minoritised communities are excluded (Afridi and Warmington, 2009; Tilki et al, 2015). The eligibility and qualification criteria/requirements and the systems that funders put in place in these bids to reduce risk and hold organisations accountable end up excluding these micro-organisations from the bidding process (Holloway, 2015; Murray, 2020). Most of the micro-organisation leads attributed their difficulties in accessing funding to funders' 'unreasonable' systems and inappropriate measures to reduce risk. They also reported funders' lack of trust of Black-led micro-organisations because of negative stereotypes. These micro-organisations are almost always unsuccessful in funded bids as they are generally unable to meet the eligibility requirements of most funders.

The provision of targeted funding using the partnership model may be criticised for not dealing with institutional racism; however, it was beneficial in overcoming the funding difficulties the micro-organisations had. Institutional racism is usually unconscious and entrenched in the way things have always been done; therefore, although in this project the funds targeted minoritised community-led organisations, the micro-organisations on their own and as a group still did not meet the funders' eligibility requirements. To overcome this difficulty would take time and innovation to come up with more appropriate measures and systems suitable for such informal, small groups. While this much-needed discussion is ongoing, these micro-organisations need funds to help their communities in the post-COVID-19 recovery.

Mutually beneficial partnerships between mainstream organisations and minoritised community-led micro-organisations have worked in the past to champion various social, care and public health campaigns (Butt, 2001; Daker-White et al, 2002; Blakey et al, 2016). When targeted funding is provided, mainstream organisations, mid-level organisations and micro-organisations can collaborate more as it removes competition for limited funds. It is also worth mentioning that previous partnerships directly between minoritised community-led organisations struggled when the input of the smaller organisations was not fully appreciated (Tilki et al, 2015; Blakey et al, 2016). In this case study, the mainstream organisation recognised the importance of every organisation in the partnership and worked with them to put structures in place to reduce the potential risks and, consequently, help the project succeed. The mainstream organisation was able to reach older people who they would not have been able to engage otherwise, and the micro-organisations were able to access much-needed funds.

Trust

Trust was an overarching concept that cut across two of the three main themes. The micro-organisations reported that they were not trusted by funders because they had no previous experience of winning contracts or fund reserves. This caused a vicious circle whereby they could not gain a track record or funds in order to apply for future funding contracts. Another aspect of trust was where the micro-organisations were asked to collaborate under the guidance of a mid-level organisation. The competing contract culture and bad experiences of partnership made them not trust the mid-level organisation. Trust was, however, developed over time, allowing the partnership to succeed.

The micro-organisations reported that funders held negative stereotypical beliefs, which included that Black organisations had low financial literacy (“not good with money”), and that this was part of the reason for their low success rate in applying for funding. A similar story has been told for decades. For example, a survey of minority ethnic voluntary organisations in the 1980s and 1990s reported that funding was rejected because they were accused of not ‘[keeping] the books right’ (Butt, 2001: 214). A later study of minoritised community-led organisations in Scotland found that, in order to be taken as seriously as mainstream services, they had to work extra hard to put forward a ‘professional image’ (Netto et al, 2012: 253). Furthermore, minoritised community-led organisations reported being held to different standards than mainstream organisations (Tilki et al, 2015). These experiences are indicative of institutional racism.

Partnership working or collaboration between minoritised community-led organisations could be made difficult because of competition for limited funding, or because one group is favoured over others by those in power (Harries et al, 2020). It has been argued that the effect of the current contract funding system is to ‘divide and conquer’ minoritised community-led micro-organisations and undermine trust, rather than encourage working together (Harries et al, 2020: 34). In this case study, the bringing together of a number of micro-organisations meant that people who were used to leading an organisation had to adapt to being one of a group of leaders. This, in addition to the competitive contract culture, caused some friction at first, which required a certain degree of tact to manage. Partnering with a mid-level minority ethnic organisation meant that the money available for the actual

project delivery was reduced, which undermined trust even more. What helped was that the project manager was respected and well known in the community. They were able to hold the project together precisely because of the esteem in which they were already held. Someone unknown in the community may not have been able to coordinate the partnership meetings so successfully. Furthermore, the project manager acted as a conduit between the mainstream organisation and the micro-organisations. Partnership working between mainstream and minoritised community-led organisations has previously been reported to be facilitated by good communication, respect and openness, among other things (Blakey et al, 2016). The present study demonstrates that this can be achieved but partly relies on skilled leadership from the right individual.

Limitations

This article presents a case study of the attempt of a mainstream voluntary organisation to create a partnership with several micro-organisations. It is plausible that participants had a vested interest in presenting the partnership as a success to encourage confidence from future funding bodies. However, the findings show a balance of advantages and disadvantages of the partnership, which argues against such a one-sided presentation. Similarly, the first author was commissioned by the mainstream voluntary organisation to carry out the research, and so could potentially be under pressure to report a positive outcome. However, she was contracted as an independent researcher, and her findings were not influenced by the funder. The recruitment approach involved the project manager from one of the micro-organisations acting as a gatekeeper, which may have led to an expectation that the micro-organisation staff members would take part despite the voluntary participation principle employed by the first author. However, in practice, the first author found that all participants were very keen to have their voices heard.

Recommendations

While the provision of targeted funding through the partnership model was successful in getting funds to the Black-led micro-organisations, institutional racism is yet to be dealt with. As highlighted earlier, it may be argued that the need for a partnership with a mid-level organisation to meet the funders' requirements does not deal with the systems and requirements that directly or indirectly exclude minoritised community-led micro-organisations. The systemic underfunding of minoritised ethnic community-led micro-organisations can only be addressed by looking at funders' systems and bidding requirements and assessing how they exclude these micro-organisations. Therefore, to make a real difference, funders should recognise the value of the micro-organisations in reaching older people from minoritised communities. They should come up with innovative and appropriate measures and processes suitable for such small, informal groups that will ensure a fair bidding process. They could, for instance, conduct qualitative interviews to assess the impact of the minoritised community-led micro-organisations as part of the bidding process, instead of relying on numbers and figures.

Understandably, challenging and changing systems takes time. However, these grassroots organisations need to access funding urgently as we move into the

recovery phase of the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, the provision of targeted long-term funding using the partnership model presented in this article could be a useful tool to make funds more accessible to micro-organisations in the short term. The funding should include budget for infrastructure (for example, office premises and basic management systems), advocacy, counselling, capacity building and core operational costs.

Finally, minoritised community-led micro-organisations themselves could also use this partnership model to collaborate with bigger organisations to improve their chances of meeting the current ‘bid requirements’.

Funding

This work was supported by the Ageing Better in Camden partnership.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the key staff of ABC and the managers, project leads and volunteers of the various micro-organisations for their continuous support to the research process.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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