

Black and minority ethnic organisations' experience of local compacts

Voluntary and community sector organisations have been negotiating the development of compacts at central and local government levels. A joint research team from the Universities of Brighton and Hull has been exploring and evaluating the development of compacts over the last three years through a series of studies. One focused study examined the perceptions of black and minority ethnic voluntary and community organisations towards the development of local compacts. The study found that:

- f** Few black and minority ethnic voluntary and community organisations were aware of local compact development; only one had heard of the national black and minority ethnic code of practice and most felt that they had not been involved properly in local compact discussion. They did not feel engaged as full partners in local compact development work.
- f** Respondents felt that mainstream voluntary sector organisations were not in a position to represent the interests of black and minority ethnic communities either in general or in the development of local compacts.
- f** Black and minority ethnic voluntary and community organisations felt they were marginal to local policy debates. They were mainly used by mainstream and statutory agencies to deliver the latter's goals and targets rather than being fully involved in strategic policy discussion; most felt also that they had little access to senior policy-makers or politicians. Some feared that the introduction of local compacts might be used to reduce grant aid, impose further service level agreements and marginalise their role even further.
- f** Respondents felt that black and minority ethnic voluntary and community organisations were not acting cohesively, except when there were crises – for example with funding arrangements. They were often involved in their own community politics rather than joining together to make strategic responses to policy debates and discussion.
- f** Respondents also argued that the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector was overstretched and under-resourced. Significant additional resources were needed to build both its infrastructure and capacity to respond to local issues and act strategically when necessary.
- f** Black and minority ethnic voluntary and community organisations shared some of the concerns about the compact expressed more widely in the sector, particularly that:
 - the compact had only voluntary status with no legislative backing;
 - no additional resources had been allocated to make it work effectively;
 - there was little attention to monitoring or sustainability.

Background

In 1997, the government began negotiating national compacts (a framework of principles and processes shaping relationships) between central government and the voluntary and community sectors in England, Wales and Scotland. Subsequently, it also encouraged the development of local compacts. The present research team mapped local compacts and evaluated their development in 12 local case study areas. However, this main study was not able to explore sufficiently the involvement of black and minority ethnic voluntary and community organisations (described hereafter as minority organisations or groups). The researchers therefore set up a modest extension study, which explored black and minority ethnic involvement in four of the main study's case study sites.

Access to black and minority ethnic groups

All of the 20 organisations contacted were pleased to participate. They expressed confidence in the fact that this was an independently funded study, looking at the issues objectively and from a black perspective.

The researcher's decision to make direct and independent contact with minority groups caused some concern in two case study sites. In one site, a local authority officer asked to be present when local groups were interviewed but withdrew the request when it was explained that some of the interviews might be held in languages other than English. In another site, the local authority and the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) were concerned that they had not been forewarned and wanted to know which groups were being contacted and interviewed.

Main findings

Only five groups had heard of the national compact and attended information seminars organised by local CVSs. Only two of these, both with paid staff, were involved in a local compact steering group. The other three groups had neither received any further information nor been invited to participate in developing the initiative, even though they had expressed an interest in doing so. Steering groups had been established in their areas but there was a general perception that local authorities had tended to rely on CVSs to take the initiative forward and had not attempted to involve specifically minority groups. CVSs were generally working with more established groups and were not seen actively to be involving the diversity of groups.

Respondents felt that the compact provided an opportunity for local communities to participate in a meaningful way and could encourage political participation. But lack of resources within the black voluntary sector had meant that groups were too busy

providing services to participate much in strategic policy debates. They argued that this would result in larger, well established, mainstream organisations benefiting most in the long term.

Minority groups were disappointed that, despite having strong community links and good track records of working with the community, they were not being engaged in an important policy area. They commented that when statutory agencies needed to consult the black and minority ethnic community for their own purposes, for example for regeneration bids, they were eager to approach minority organisations to organise and undertake this work on their behalf. They were also eager to use minority organisations to deliver services to populations they found difficult to reach. But this was not reflected in their approach to compact development.

Some respondents said that the views of black workers in generic agencies were being accepted by white professionals as sufficient consultation; this was rejected as a very inadequate and unprofessional form of consultation.

Only one respondent was aware of the national Code of Practice for Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Organisations recently launched by the government. This organisation worked at a strategic level and had the largest number of paid staff.

Views of the national compact were mixed. Those groups which had heard of it generally welcomed the initiative, stating that it would help establish links with central government policy and improve access to local and central government. This would enable the black voluntary sector to participate more effectively with government and mainstream voluntary groups. However, most were also cautious of the compact and saw its potential for being used by the local authority to reduce grant aid and introduce service level agreements and contracts to already struggling minority groups. This might generate competition between groups, which needed to work together.

Opportunities and challenges

Government expects minority groups to be involved in local compact development. Repeatedly, respondents underlined the fact that groups with limited budgets and no paid staff found it difficult to give any priority to the compact. Tight budgets, skill shortages, and heavy workloads within the black voluntary sector were major problems and investment in its infrastructure would be essential if this was to change.

Despite these difficulties, most organisations wanted to be involved and would participate if they were equal partners. Potential strengths of the compact highlighted by groups included:

- providing an opportunity to enhance links with a range of organisations;

- strengthening links between the black voluntary sector, the local authority and central government;
- acknowledging the services that the sector provides;
- providing an opportunity to properly cost and charge for services for black and minority ethnic communities.

Weaknesses identified by many groups included:

- whether the compact was simply rhetorical;
- how any change would be sustained;
- how the compact would engage minority organisations given the lack of extra funding;
- how it would be monitored and by whom.

Minority groups were concerned that gains in community participation took a long time. Another major concern was their unequal positions of power. Many groups were funded by a statutory agency and as the compact was not a binding document, they were not sure how it could help achieve real change or enable the black voluntary sector to influence statutory bodies.

There was a consensus that local authorities should lead on policy directives such as the compact but should establish partnerships with key minority groups and other generic agencies to take such issues to local communities, if necessary commissioning this work from minority organisations. If groups were given resources to undertake this work, they could then involve their constituents in a meaningful process. Some respondents acknowledged, however, that minority groups also needed to take responsibility for finding out about the compact and its significance and suggested that networking and information sharing needed to increase within the black voluntary sector. A number of voluntary community organisations said they did not have time to keep up to date with new policies and developments. There seemed to be too much information being sent out, particularly for isolated lone project staff.

Wider issues

Many interviewees stated that their groups were used as delivery agents by mainstream and statutory agencies to meet their own objectives and targets. Mainstream agencies did not engage with them as equal partners and minority voluntary community organisations were excluded from policy or strategy initiatives.

Minority groups also felt their funding outputs were monitored more stringently. Whilst this harnessed their energies into developing and delivering high quality, culturally appropriate services, it left less time to participate in policy dialogues. Another concern was that culturally appropriate services cost more; this was an issue yet to be faced by funders who, though they wanted equality and innovation, still compared costs with mainstream

projects. However, there seemed to be a shift away from this, particularly where funding came from regeneration programmes such as New Deal for Communities, Sure Start and Health Action Zones, where some funding decisions had been devolved to community level.

Whilst most minority groups had good relationships with funding agencies, they had access only to junior or middle gatekeepers. The interest of specific officers made a difference to relationships with statutory agencies, as (usually negatively) did a change in lead officer or agency restructuring. Very few had access to senior managers or directors and in some cases did not know who senior staff were. There was no evidence that access to senior officers had improved since the compact process began.

Demands to undertake partnership work had increased due to changes in national government policy which now required regeneration programmes to consult with black and minority ethnic communities and appoint their representatives on regeneration boards. Most regeneration initiatives were in areas with a high concentration of black and minority ethnic populations and many minority organisations felt swamped by the amount of work and time being spent on organising consultation and evaluation events, identifying people to sit on boards, and attending meetings, whilst continuing to provide services. Some said this additional work was being undertaken with no additional income even, in some instances, while their budgets were being cut. Suggestions for alleviating some of these concerns included:

- appointment of more development and outreach workers to support black and minority ethnic voluntary activity;
- appointment of black consultants to reach out to smaller groups;
- use of the black media and networks to advertise and promote compact development;
- mapping of the black voluntary sector within each area;
- minority groups to be given adequate resources to undertake this work;
- consultation training for black and minority ethnic staff and management committee members to engage with their communities more effectively (many pointed out that the variety of methods used by the present study was an effective approach).

Relationships with mainstream voluntary sector organisations

Most respondents felt their relationship with mainstream local community organisations was good; groups interacted and networked and referred clients to each other. Minority groups stated that, used effectively, the compact would further help to improve

relationships between mainstream voluntary organisations and the black voluntary sector. All respondents agreed, however, that mainstream organisations could not represent black and minority ethnic interests because:

- most organisations arise in response to specific needs which are not being met; consequently mainstream organisations could not meet the very specific needs of black and minority ethnic communities;
- black and minority ethnic services provide specialised and culturally appropriate services and are able to meet the linguistic, ethnic and religious needs of their clients;
- groups meeting the needs of black and minority ethnic communities have often already established a track record within these communities. Mainstream organisations would generally take much longer to do this.

Relationship with black and minority ethnic voluntary sector organisations

Most groups acknowledged that the black voluntary sector was not working cohesively, often because of its cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. They were, however, confident that the compact could contribute towards improving relationships between these organisations particularly if mainstream agencies appreciated this diversity. Groups were often competing for the same funding because they appeared to be providing a similar service, e.g. within the same geographical area, day care services might be provided by three different community groups, each culturally appropriate to their own community. Respondents were also concerned that minority groups were too involved in their own community politics, only coming together when there was a crisis such as threatened funding cuts. Workers felt that relationships between groups could improve further if opportunities for networking and information exchange existed. Improvements might include:

- recruitment of more black staff;
- increase in resources for groups;
- provision of longer-term core funding to focus on developing partnerships and alleviate fund-raising fatigue;
- increased opportunities for networking and partnerships;
- more senior black officers in statutory authorities;
- more effective black councillors.

About the project

This extension project ran for six months from January 2001, in parallel with the final stages of the

main study. Three of the four case study sites were urban with a high concentration of black and minority ethnic population and evidence of a black voluntary sector, and one was a rural site with a smaller minority population and a less visible black voluntary sector. The researcher concentrated on finding minority groups through networking and snowballing. Initial information about groups was gathered through local organisational and individual contacts. In three of these areas, a compact between the local authority and the voluntary community sector was being developed, whilst in one area two compacts were being developed, one each with the local authority and local health organisations. This *Findings* has been written by Alia Syed, Gary Craig and Marilyn Taylor.

How to get further information

The full report, **Contract or trust? The role of compacts in local governance** by Gary Craig, Marilyn Taylor, Mick Wilkinson and Kate Bloor with Surya Munro and Alia Syed, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 379 5, price £10.95).