



# UBUNTU

## BULLETIN

Black Perspectives in Community Development Training

SUMMER 2003

## REFLECT ACTION (RA) COMES TO CARDIFF!

Imagine this, a warm Saturday night in Cardiff. You've just spent a pleasurable evening with colleagues, and you're now sat in a car, and just about to leave when your path is blocked by a police van. Three officers leap out dressed in para-military uniform carrying very large weapons. Before you know it, they have run to the back of the car, shouting 'get down and don't move!' You turn in your seat to find the danger. Two Black men lie face down on the pavement, looking anxious and bewildered all at once. Now three white police officers have their weapons trained on the men on the ground.

As a Black CD worker, how do you respond? The espoused theory that is central to Black perspectives is to challenge the system. However, the practice theory says 'police with guns, run!' It is a contradiction such as this that twenty Black and minority ethnic practitioners explored using RA.

### BACKGROUND TO RA

RA began life in the mid 90s as a literacy tool. Since then, it

has been developed and used across the southern hemisphere. Over time, the model has evolved into an approach to working with groups to achieve sustainable community development.

### ISSUES, DEBATES AND PROCESS

As a tool for community development RA offered a framework in which to begin to address some of the issues reflected in the experience above and others. They are a daily reality for Black and minority ethnic communities, and we as practitioners are also faced with this 'reality'. Is it possible to challenge without being labelled aggressive and confrontational? And how do we address the prevailing sense summed up as 'If I challenge, I will lose?' Just how far do we engage in 'the game' and what are the consequences of this? One such game the Black and minority ethnic community is already very familiar with is white decision-making structures redefining perspectives that attempt to

Welcome to the **UBUNTU Bulletin**, a newsletter on Black perspectives in community development learning and training.

**UBUNTU Bulletin** is a regular feature of **The Community Work Training Bulletin** but is also sent to all members of **UBUNTU**, the interest group of the **Federation for Community Development Learning for Black and Ethnic Minority community workers and activists**.

If you would like more information about joining **UBUNTU** please contact **Carol Jones, Development Officer Black Perspectives, at the Federation for Community Development Learning** on

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articulate the concerns of Black and minority ethnic communities as simply an outcome of 'diversity', or a lack of social cohesion. How and why does this continue to happen?

RA acts as a tool that helps to create the conditions in which to look for the answers to these questions, and possible solutions to



problems. A basic assumption is that the whole process begins with individuals in a group context. It is not about finding the *right* answer or solution to the issues raised. Rather the emphasis is placed on exploring values, attitudes and beliefs that create particular mind-sets using our subjective experience to learn and share with each other, and hence bring about sustainable change.

## THE TOOLS

Although it is possible to design RA in this way, there was no set programme. By its very nature RA is an organic process. The tools therefore are a way of identifying the agendas and facilitating dialogue, reflection, analysis and change. As such for RA to work it is dependent on intensive input from all involved.

Practitioners were able to explore the degree to which we tacitly accept existing power structures and the quick fix approach that dominates many initiatives aimed at redressing social and economic disparities. These in turn undermine genuine attempts aimed at making space for Black and minority ethnic led ideas and solutions to strengthening communities (Black and white).

Through a series of exercises, participants began to make connections linking their personal experiences, values and belief systems to roles as practitioners. This too was a challenge to received wisdom, which says professionalism is all. The

exercises were not structured in terms of time. Instead, timetables were left flexible and agreed at each stage as priorities were identified.

Tools used included icebreakers, which engendered physical contact, and structured to respect cultural and religious taboos. The theory being that breaking down physical barriers can help to create a sense of affinity between participants. The 'Circle of Power' exercise aimed to establish a shared sense of the value, principles or ethics that would govern the way the group worked together over the coming five days and hopefully beyond. In small groups, statements/sentences were agreed and brought to the full group for discussion and agreement. Participants prioritised by placing a personal object on one of the statements. They then explained the significance of the object and how it linked to their choice of statement. This process did however have unintended consequences that demonstrated how difficult it can be to move from a linear approach to decision-making to one based on notions of equity and all-embracing dialogue. Suffice to say a key learning for the group was a better understanding of just how pivotal shared values and principles are to individual and collective change.

Other exercises included the River of Life, which enabled participants to identify significant milestones and experiences in their lives up to the present day. The group was divided along gender lines and generated much

discussion. For the men this was particularly significant as many of them acknowledged that it was the first time they had talked openly about themselves as men. The learning from this process reflected a significant difference between eurocentric and a Black perspectives approach to community development which is the importance of being the subject in control rather than the object of any given plan, programme or strategy. It is counter-productive to attempt dialogue and problem solving based purely on what one thinks without acknowledging the role of feelings in creating action and change.

## WHAT NEXT

It is not possible to capture totally the process shared by practitioners in Cardiff. Despite the limitations, they are keen to share their learning with other practitioners and so hope to develop an interactive cd-rom that will give a flavour of RA as experienced by the group. They also intend to continue to meet up to continue sharing learning and to give and receive support for their work. There will also be a written report produced in the autumn by the Black Voluntary Sector Network Wales (BVSNW) and Federation. If you would like to receive a copy, or discuss any aspect of RA, please contact Carol Jones at the Federation on 0114 273939, or email [carol@fcdl.org.uk](mailto:carol@fcdl.org.uk). Or Maria Constanza Mesa at BVSNW on 02920 450068, email [info@bvsnw.org](mailto:info@bvsnw.org).



# UBUNTU MEMBER PROFILE

**H**ayat Hewitt is a Development Officer, working across all communities and employed by Community Voluntary Service (CVS), Fife, Scotland. Her brief is to contribute to building the capacity and sustainability of community based organisations (CBO). Here she shares some of her experience. The population of Fife is predominately made up of majority ethnic Scots, a visible Asian community and much smaller Chinese and African communities (in some areas this may be only one household).

## BLACK, (ASIAN) AND MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

A major issue for Black groups in Scotland is the struggle against the 'dependency culture'. The approach taken by some white community development workers which has been to 'do' for Black groups has sometimes resulted in under development of Black groups and low levels of self confidence.

Redressing these effects of albeit well meaning white practitioners continues to present a major challenge. In practice this has meant intensive work with some groups to ensure Black perspectives of community development are given recognition. This has helped to undermine the impact of internalised oppression, underpinned by institutional racism, whereby Black groups sometimes appear to collude for fear of appearing stupid.

## 'BLACK' DOES NOT GET USED IN SCOTLAND

A major difference to working with minority ethnic communities in Scotland is resistance to the use of the word 'Black' in its political and ideological sense and hence notions of Black perspectives. The most common rationale for this is that the word is inappropriate in that it does not describe significant groups particularly those from the Indian continent. This however misses the point, which is not to deny difference, but to signify the shared experience of addressing the impact of racism on individuals and communities as a whole.

## THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT LEARNING IN IDENTIFYING TRAINING NEEDS

Developing learning opportunities within a Community development context in Scotland needs to distinguish between rural and urban settings. Minority communities are scattered across the country. Logistical considerations of travel and communication take on particular importance. An individual and organisational skills audit is undertaken which has community development values and principles at its core. So for example, confidence building training will aim not only to enhance levels of community engagement but also to empower individuals to make sustainable and desirable change in other aspects of their lives. Community development often marks the beginning of a

process of personal development through learning that reflects a person centred approach. This offers individuals the space to articulate their experiences and a safe environment which in turn can add value to the organisation and community.

Equal opportunities and diversity is also approached within the context of community development. It is not however, simply a matter of having a written policy. For Hayat the focus should be to establish a platform to explore broader diversity and EO issues. This needn't take place solely within the context of training.

Hayat has developed a strategy aimed at addressing these issues on two levels; the individual and organisational. An attempt at the level of the individual has met with strong resistance. However, at a strategic level there has been some moves towards introducing equality proofing, but this has highlighted the need for training and support for those charged with delivering services. Equality proofing offers a model that enables organisations to critically assess their organisation and develop strategies aimed at improving and extending quality service provision, and to demonstrate application in practice.

## A METHOD OF WORKING WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS IN FIFE

The process begins with a needs assessment that looks at organisational and decision



making structures. Interviews are held with all stakeholders, ending with the development of a strategic framework that includes clear objectives. This process is inclusive, in that all with an interest in the organisation have a role to play. This is fundamental to the way Hayat works, as personal development is as important as organisational development. A report is then produced which outlines key findings and

recommendations following on from the needs assessment. This is used as the basis for further discussion with all those involved in the process. CVS, Fife also provides training to help meet identified needs as part of a partnership agreement.

#### THE FUTURE

From Black perspectives Hayat feels that developing the capacity of minority ethnic

communities in Scotland is crucial if they are to take advantage of existing and emerging opportunities to engage in national agendas and debates on something near an equal footing. However, this will depend on how much commitment there is to redressing the culture of one-way knowledge and experience stemming from white professionals towards minority ethnic communities.

#### UBUNTU EVENT

## BLACK PERSPECTIVES OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

*Thursday 18th September 2003*

Friends' Meeting House,  
Mount Street, Manchester M2 5NS  
9.30 am – 4 pm

**A seminar for Black and minority ethnic practitioners and activists interested in developing their understanding of social justice from Black perspectives.**

***Book early as places are limited. See booking form or contact FCDL.***

#### UBUNTU AND FEDERATION EVENT

## WORKING WITH ALLIES

*Tuesday 4th November 2003*

London Voluntary Sector  
Resource Centre (LVSC)  
356 Holloway Road,  
London N7 6PA

**All current policy initiatives and many funding opportunities require working in partnership. This raises issues such as understanding and valuing differences, addressing inequalities in power and working in inclusive ways.**

**This event is for all community development workers and others who are seeking to be effective allies in supporting the development of Black perspectives in community development work.**

***For more information contact Carol Jones at FCDL.***