

Reos Review

INNOVATION IN COMPLEX SOCIAL SYSTEMS



Image: Henry Thompson

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A burning and deeply uncomfortable enquiry has begun to emerge for me. It comes from decades of working as a change agent and my seemingly 'heroic' attempts to influence and change social systems in Britain.

The question is complex, increasingly taxing and appears to be stuck. It is I believe, the ideal type of enquiry for a Change Lab approach, and, I am sharing it with anyone who is interested in entering into dialogue about it. My big question is:

'Why have more than 60 years of British social policy, aimed at reducing social inequalities, and promoting social inclusion, failed to build strong and thriving African - Caribbean communities in Britain?'

Over the years I have seen myself change from a radical young black woman into a much more moderate middle-aged adult. However, even at this life stage, I would not describe myself as holding particularly conservative views on the social, political and economic issues we have faced since arriving here in the 1950's. However, as I reflect on the myriad of strategies, plans and interventions designed by successive governments, as well as our individual and community efforts, I am drawn to ask, why has the majority of this well meaning, highly planned activity not had the positive, long term impact they were designed to achieve? Why is the black community, not at the very least, on par with other ethnic minority groups, (some of whom are quite recent arrivals)? Or indeed, why are we not excelling in key aspects of life including educational achievement, health and well-being, family life, employment, business, the legal system, to name just a few?

Of course, I understand all too well some of the ways in which the system has impacted negatively on our communities in Britain. I have countless personal and professional stories to reflect on, and have read sufficiently on the issue to be left in no doubt as to some of the reasons this occurs and the devastating impact of discrimination and racism on individuals, groups, organisations and communities. Then there is documented evidence, to which I have also contributed whilst on postgraduate programmes as well as through my own consultancy work, which makes compelling and often disturbing reading. Our trials and tribulations, negative life chances and below average outcomes are often over-reported. Just reflect on the amount of media attention given to

the rise of black teenage gangs and youth murders in London over the past three years, compared with national, regional or even local reporting of our community's 'good news' stories.

The desire to stimulate an enquiry about how to build our communities so they are characterized by long term sustainability resonates deep within me. I am left with an uneasy feeling about what this could possibly mean for future generations, including that of my 16 year old daughter's. Will 'we' be here in strength (and I don't just mean numerically), in the next 50 years? The planned massive cuts in public sector expenditure and the emergence of 'The Big Society', with its plans for



the transference of power to local communities (which will inevitably go to those who shout the loudest), means that we will not have access to anything like the same level of public sector resources we have traditionally relied on to support our communities and community endeavours.

Having made it my life's work to eradicate inequality and discrimination and to work for the voices of those who are most marginalised to be heard, I am beginning to feel that these systems have been changed very little. One significant and rather interesting outcome however that seems to have occurred is more gender equality in white staff at senior levels of public sector organisations.

There is one final question that I am curious about. It concerns how best to address our leadership challenge. I am increasingly aware that our community leaders who championed our causes for more than five decades are either ageing, experiencing ill health or are spending much of their remaining time in their country/s or continent/s of origin. I am deeply struck by the growing leadership vacuum. We have a number of high profile black professionals as well as members of the 'establishment' (which is often cited as evidence of a positive change happening in the system), and although they might be viewed as role models, this does not necessarily make them community leaders, or provides them with the personal skills and qualities to mobilise us to effect social change. I am curious about who will speak on our behalf, how will the knowledge acquired by these early pioneers be transferred inter-generationally, and most importantly who will be brave enough to pick up the mantle, continue to help capacity build our communities and lead in innovating solutions to some of our most challenging and stuck social issues?

These soul-searching questions keep me awake long into the night. I am also deeply aware that by surfacing such questions, there is a risk of being denounced by some of the very people I would like to engage. However, an intuitive feeling that these are the right questions has stirred me to a point where I just had to write. I feel energised and motivated to find ways to co-design a new national, regional and/or local multi-stakeholder process and space, or perhaps even several spaces, with members of the black community – it would host individuals as well as those representing organisations. We need to try and engage with all parts of the system under enquiry, even if we feel discomfort in doing so – that in itself is always useful data! The aim would be to journey together, (which will not be easy, but could be a transformative experience for those who are prepared to stay the course), to reflect on our big questions, to support the emergence of new ideas and for those to be prototyped. This will be much more than a talking shop – it is indeed a call to action – for what else do change agents do, if not act?.

The big question/s for our collaborative enquiry will emerge through the convening process. The container for the exploration could be a single Change Lab or series of Labs, over the coming months and years.

What do you think is the big question emerging for black communities in Britain?

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My Big Question
