

# BME mainstream development professionals discussion starter



## Diaspora Professionals in Mainstream Development

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## **1. Overview**

### ***1.1 Paper's purpose***

1.1.1 This paper aims to set the scene for the discussions that will take place on Thursday 20 November among Black and minority ethnic (BME) professionals working in the UK's mainstream international development sector. It is literally intended to get the discussion started, the outcome of which we cannot predict at this early stage. Please do not read it as either a definitive analysis of the current situation or the sum total of possible outcomes.

### ***1.2 Why AFFORD & BME development professionals?***

As we explain briefly below, AFFORD works with the African diaspora to enhance Africa's development. So why not target just Africans working within the mainstream development sector? The reason is simple and pragmatic. We think that where BME individuals do work in the mainstream development sector they are more likely to work together on the basis of their common interest as Black Minority Ethnic people rather than on the basis of being African. In other words, we are governed more by the way we perceive people to organise themselves rather than our assumed basis. However, we make no apologies for our obvious emphasis here and in our work more generally on Africa's development. We assume that among BME professionals working in mainstream development, at least a subset might be interested in engaging with us around the African development agenda (while not downplaying the importance of the development of any other region that might be the concern of other organisations).

### ***1.3 Definitions***

1.3.1 **African:** AFFORD works on the basis of an inclusive and fairly broad understanding of the term African. We do not think the question of who is an African can or should be boiled down to questions of "race". In the first instance, we are talking about people who identify themselves as African. However, while that is a necessary condition, it is far from sufficient. In addition to the subjective dimension of self-identification, there are objective criteria to fulfil. Thus, an African, in our view, would:

- (a) be an African national i.e. be eligible to carry the passport of an African country (even if s/he carries dual nationality but subject to the proviso that a passport has been acquired by legal and legitimate means); or
- (b) have parents who are African nationals and have been born and/or have grown up in Africa; or
- (c) be a descendant of a migrant from Africa; or
- (d) be a descendant of a person taken from Africa during the Atlantic or other slave trades.

In offering the above (not entirely mutually exclusive) categories of people we neither claim to be totally exhaustive nor academically rigorous; ours is more of a pragmatic approach that includes the main groups of people with whom we engage.

If someone who considers herself/himself to be African feels excluded from the categories above, we appeal to her/him to contact us directly as we intend to deal with such incidents (which we believe will be rare – we have not come across such a case since AFFORD's formation in 1994) on a case by case basis. We must also stress that AFFORD works with

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and is supported by many individuals and organisations that are not African; thus room exists to collaborate with people who share our vision, mission and values.

The above is a working reference that we periodically review.

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1.3.2 **Diaspora:** We use this term to refer to people who, while living in one place that they may or may not consider to be their home, also identify another place as “home” with which they have either recent or historical ancestral ties.

1.3.3 **Mainstream development:** We use this term to refer to institutions or organisations that are formally recognised as having a role in supporting some aspect of international development. In the UK context, it might include the Department for International Development (DFID), most large and medium-sized non-governmental organisations (NGOs), policy think tanks such as the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and academic institutions such as the Institute for Development Studies, Sussex University. Further a field it might include UN bodies, the Bretton Woods Institutions, African governments, etc. By using the term mainstream, we do not intend to imply either a positive or negative view of this sector, merely to contrast it with non-mainstream efforts, such as those initiated by diaspora organisations.

1.3.4 **BME:** We borrow this term from general usage to refer to people in the UK who are visible minorities, usually with origins in the developing south.

1.3.5 **UK-based African civil society organisations:** We refer here to the diverse range of African-led organisations that work, in one way or another, for the development of some part of Africa. Often such organisations are what we might call identity-based in the sense that members may emanate from one particular community, whether this is geographical, ethnic, or the school people attended in Africa.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 AFFORD**

2.1.1 **Mission:** AFFORD was formed in 1994 by London-based Africans with a mission to expand and enhance the contribution that Africans in the diaspora make to Africa's development.

2.1.2 **Strategic vision:** We work to achieve four strategic goals: (1) to influence the African development agenda; (2) to shift the balance of power to Africa; (3) to build a strong and sustainable AFFORD; (4) to strengthen AFFORD's legitimacy and effectiveness.

2.1.3 **Activities:** We undertake a range of activities to achieve the above. These include

capacity building support for UK-based African civil society organisations (UKBACSOs) working for Africa's development;

facilitation of and support for several networks and consortia involving the African diaspora and African development, including African Diaspora Voices for Africa's Development (ADVAD) and the Africans Without Borders (AWB) online forum;

- facilitation and support for young Africans to be more actively involved in Africa's development;

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- management of the African Diaspora Development Awareness Resource Centre;
- organisation, with partners in the *africa21* consortium, of the annual African Diaspora & Development Day (ad3);
- a range of courses in partnership with universities and other training/educational institutions;
- numerous projects that address some development-related issue, such as “Aiding & Abetting: Global Image, Local Damage?” tackling images of development;
- action-research such as “*A survey of African organisations in London*”, research into young Africans’ attitudes towards the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU), etc;
- and advocacy on key policy issues.

### ***2.2 Growing number of BME people involved in development***

**2.2.1 Professional career:** Our perception at least is that more BME professionals now work in the mainstream development, whether this is in NGOs, DFID, academia or other institutional settings. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the brightest and best young graduates now perceive DFID as a more appealing employer than, say, finance ministries, more traditionally seen as the main target for ambitious graduates.

**2.2.2 Voluntary activity:** The NGO umbrella body BOND has noted that the biggest growth in numbers of new organisations is coming from BME communities forming organisations (such as UKBACSOs). Young Africans with a passion for and interest in Africa often translate these into career impulses that lead them to seek a job in the mainstream development sector. In AFFORD’s experience, this is particularly true of young African women.

### ***2.3 Changing development context***

**2.3.1 Diaspora's increasing significance & visibility in development:** In 2001, according to the World Bank’s *Global Development Finance 2003* report, migrant workers’ remittance flows to developing countries totalled \$72 billion. These receipts exceeded aid and private loan finance and were the second largest source of external finance for the developing (low and middle-income) countries. We know that even a figure as large as \$72 billion is a gross underestimate of the true figure that would include informal remittance flows. Thus we are justified in asserting that Africans and Asians are their own biggest “aid donors”.

Speaking earlier this year to Ghanaians in London, President John Kufuor of Ghana reported that the Bank of Ghana estimated that the Ghanaian diaspora put in \$1.3bn into the Ghanaian economy last year. In the nine years that Western Union has operated in Nigeria, the Nigerian diaspora has transferred \$28bn into the country using the company’s services.

Although few are willing or able to return home permanently in the short term, working

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through a variety of networks, agencies and institutions, diasporas are using their skills, experience, know how, and contacts for the benefit of their countries of origin, thereby transforming the so-called brain drain into a brain gain.

Although we often witness shifts in priorities, focus and methods, advocacy, lobbying and campaigning have long been significant activities for diasporas present in the UK. Globalisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> presents its own challenges that diaspora organisations seem to be getting to grips with.

**2.3.2 Policy agenda shifts in Africa:** Both NEPAD and the AU have generated hope, doubts, expectations, and cynicism in seemingly equal measure. However, whatever one's views of these developments, they seem to signify some fundamental shifts in the nature of Africa's leadership, policy frameworks and approaches that every stakeholder in the continent's development must engage with.

**2.3.3 South-south cooperation:** During his election campaign, Brazil's President Lula Ignacio da Silva pledged to make Africa a top foreign relations priority. True to his word, he has just completed a five-nation visit to southern Africa. The recently collapsed World Trade talks witnessed the formation of a south-south alliance that combined heavyweights such as India, Brazil, China, South Africa, etc to advance their collective interests.

**2.3.4 Mainstream donors and NGOs rethinking their roles:** Some donors have sought to decentralise decision making and operations to get closer to the people and problems on the ground. Some NGOs have also decentralised, while others seem to be undergoing a process of "Africanisation", thereby raising fundamental questions about the identity and allegiances of African civil society.

At the same time, DFID and some NGOs have taken on the diversity agenda in a bid to become more reflective of the increasingly diverse UK society in which they are based.

Perhaps related to the above, both DFID and some NGOs are seeking to engage more meaningfully with civil society in the UK. DFID has recently signed a Strategic Grant Agreement with Connections for Development, a network of BME communities with a shared interest in international development. More generally, DFID's efforts around raising development awareness among the UK public as a whole continue. NGOs have mounted successful campaigns around debt and trade, with implications for their efforts to secure legitimacy as credible expressions of the will of UK civil society to transform global politics.

## ***2.4 Opportunities?***

**2.4.1 Meaningful & mutually beneficial linkages:** To our knowledge, there are relatively few opportunities either for BME professionals working in different organisations or BME professionals and UKBACSOs and young Africans to interact around a shared interest in and concern for Africa's development. We felt it opportune and appropriate, therefore, to engage BME development professionals in the first instance in a conversation around these issues with a view to explore where such interaction might lead.

The areas of possible interest discussed below are neither finite nor prescriptive. They are the

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result of an internal brainstorm of the possibilities within AFFORD, based on our perceptions, assessment of the realities and interests.

### **3. Possible areas of interest**

#### ***3.1 BME professionals support for diaspora-led development efforts***

UKBACSOs undertake a range of initiatives and activities to advance the development of parts of Africa. These efforts are largely invisible, unsupported by the general development industry infrastructure, unsung, and unrewarded. At this stage, we know relatively little about the impact of UKBACSOs' developmental efforts although we believe that a challenge exists to ensure that these efforts have maximum impact and lead to long-term sustainable change in Africa.

In spite of the good work they undertake, UKBACSOs – like many voluntary organisations in the UK – suffer from a number of capacity constraints at all levels from governance to strategic to operational. BME development professionals could serve as a valuable resource to vastly enhance UKBACSOs' capacity and effectiveness.

#### ***3.2 BME professionals' own development***

**3.2.1 Advance change agenda:** Many NGOs proclaim to be at the cutting edge of a change agenda, both internally within the organisation and externally within the sector as a whole. Professionals with BME backgrounds often have unique contributions to make but can sometimes find their insights are overlooked, they are marginalised or perceived to be an unwelcome siren voice. Such BME professionals may find that their ability to influence change in progressive ways is enhanced by being in touch with like minds and kindred spirits both inside and outside the industry.

**3.2.2 Promote effectiveness of diversity policies:** NGOs are not alone among UK organisations struggling to get to grips with diversity issues. Given development NGOs' values-led proposition, the UK public has high expectations of such organisations' competence in handling diversity within their own organisations if we are to trust them to be able to handle global inequalities and injustices with credibility. It is often groups of BME professionals and individuals within NGOs who carry the largest responsibility for helping organisations to get their diversity issues right. An ability to share know-how, perspectives and experience (while respecting individual organisations' confidentiality, of course) may provide a win/win solution of better NGO performance on diversity that leads to better performance in achieving their respective missions.

**3.2.3 Professional mentoring:** Organisations are increasingly recognising the importance of coaching and mentoring to help build individual and team performance and organisational effectiveness. Professionals with BME backgrounds often face particular difficulties in the work environment and benefit from empathetic mentoring support that can connect meaningfully with this experience. However, finding appropriate mentors with BME backgrounds is difficult not least because of an absence of suitable networks.

**3.2.4 Mutual support & information sharing:** Both who and what you know are important if we are all to advance and realise our full potential. A supportive network could be an

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important pillar in creating a more enabling environment for BME development professionals.

### ***3.3 BME professionals mentor & advise young Africans***

Today, Africans in the diaspora with active concerns and connections with Africa tend to remit monies home as part of an overall effort to support people in Africa. It is unlikely that the next generation of young diasporic Africans will engage in precisely the same ways, assuming they remain interested in Africa at all (our experience suggests that there is a significant active minority and probably a larger inactive group that could be enthused to get involved).

However, young Africans are seeking to channel their learning and skills for Africa's benefit. Arguably, given trends in the global economy towards an emphasis on application of knowledge as the basis of wealth creation, transfer of skills will be of greater importance to Africa than remittances in the future. At present, young Africans tend to focus mainly on the most visible elements of the entire development industry (such as NGOs, DFID, etc) when considering their career options. Possibly, therefore, there would be some merit in facilitating a process where young Africans could gain access to the combined experience and insight of BME professionals working in the development sector.

### ***3.4 Active involvement in AFFORD's work***

3.4.1 As noted above, AFFORD is engaged in a range of activities focused around how Africans in the diaspora can maximise the contributions they make to Africa's development. Considerable scope exists for BME development professionals who identify with AFFORD's mission to become more actively involved in the organisation's work through committees, membership, advice, participation in events, contributions to the newsletter, etc.

## **4. Approach**

We suggest that the next step is to engage in dialog around these issues and others that colleagues might identify. The purpose of the dialog should be to

- enable us to get know each other;
- to explore the issues;
- explore areas of common interest;
- define specific "problems" to solve;
- to agree a way forwards;
- and finally to **ACT!**