

## **Ethnic Community Environmental Participation**

### **Ethnic communities in the UK**

Although the total number of people belonging to ethnic communities is calculated as 5.8% of the UK population, they are not evenly distributed across the UK. The local reality often finds the ethnic communities making up a significant proportion, or even the majority of the population as we experience it.

Ethnic communities in the London Borough of Brent, numbering 109,000, makes up 44.9% of the local population. Eight London authorities have between them 19.66% of all ethnic people within the UK. As one moves across these huge boroughs, one will encounter entire streets and small local areas with up to 100% people from ethnic communities of different origins.

From Table 3 of the Runnymede Trust publication 'Multi-ethnic Britain: Facts and Trends', Birmingham, at the top of the table, has a population of ethnic communities of 206,000 which exceeds the entire population of Blackburn which appears at the bottom of the table at No. 29. The population of Blackburn itself stands at 136,400 with an ethnic community population of 21,000.

Within this picture, logically, one can ask, 'How can it be possible that such large numbers of people can be neglected in the traditional outreach programmes of so many organisations whose remit implies the engagement of everyone in environmental awareness and participation?'

This fact, that working with ethnic communities is not on their agenda, points to the powerful consequences of how we see the world, and of how we respond emotionally to it. The coming together of thinking and feeling dictates whether or not we involve ourselves with a particular area of work or life. It shapes how we go about it and contributes to the success or failure of a venture.

### **Lessons from a true story**

When I was working as an interpreter for the National Health Service, I once took a Chinese speaking Vietnamese little boy to the hospital. On arrival, we were informed that there was to be a delay of 3 hours for the appointment, so I suggested to the little boy Kin and his mother Fung (the names have been changed) that we should go and walk along the river, and go and see the hundreds of ducks in St. James' Park. We bought a little loaf of bread from the hospital shop and we were off. Kin was filled with ecstatic expectation and his mother with disbelief. As we progressed along the river, Fung said, 'You know, these English people are really peculiar about animals. You see all these birds flying about? We would have eaten them all.' We went onto Hungerford bridge, so that Kin could experience the trains thundering past him into Charing Cross. A pigeon landed and started to walk along the handrail. Fung looked at me, pointed to the bird, and said, 'And pigeon soup!'

When Kin, Fung and I finally arrived at St. James Park, there was the familiar sight of the ducks scuttering about on the bank and in the water. Adults and children were feeding them with bread, cake, seed, and their own lunch. Fung shook her head and remarked with astonishment, 'All these ducks - just to look at!' Kin took the bread and fed the ducks wildly. Fung and I settled down on a bench. After a while, she said to me, 'They really are beautiful, aren't they?'

Fung had lived through the terrors of a long war. Still, given the opportunity, she sat and enjoyed the simple pleasure of watching some very funny and some very beautiful ducks.

Fung's ability to encompass 2 starkly different alternative interpretations of nature highlights the twin principles of sustainable development - our survival within nature as the supporting nurturing environment, and the distinct human ability for the appreciation of qualities of nature beyond the ruthless drive for the survival of the fittest.

Fung and Kin, typical of the first generation of Vietnamese refugees, live in an area which must count as one of the worst living environments in the UK. They live on income support in a tiny council flat, in a concrete jungle in a heavily polluted area of the inner city.

### **The environment as a setting for all life**

In this country, most of the time, when we mention the word environment, it is dominated by a peacetime vision of the protection of wildlife in a world of plenty, heavily coloured by the wish for the preservation of a mythical nature untouched by man. The preservation and conservation of wildlife and of the significant natural areas which are left are of course of paramount importance, but the context for environmental participation is much wider. It is the environment in general, urban and rural, as a setting for all life - plant life, animal life and human life.

Additionally, beyond basic survival, it is a specifically human quality to have the tendency to have the capacity for the attribution of values and meaning to experience.

Everyone is therefore connected intrinsically to the pillars of sustainable development - to fulfil human spiritual, social and physical needs, and to preserve the diversity and quality of the environment.

### **World peace and the survival of the environment**

The survival of the environment is dependent on the relationship between different ethnic groups. Both the peacetime management of the environment, and the conscious nurturing of inter-cultural understanding, in order to prevent mass genocide and large-scale devastation of the environment through human conflict, are essential to the survival of people and the environment.

In the United Kingdom, black and white ethnic communities are often seen merely as local minority cultures. In fact, they are communities whose origins connect us with world majority cultures. Within Britain, they place within our society a unique and vital opportunity for cultural interaction. They enable us to be in touch with the relationship between people and nature within scenarios across the world. They are the 'World within Britain' which enables us to gain facets of awareness and inter-cultural skills which in turn enable us to forge relevant local and global environmental policies.

### **Contact with nature**

Many new arrivals from different countries of origin, who we have notionally accepted as full members of our communities, are given so little support that they remain lost within the new culture of the country which is now their home. They are often urban-bound and have little or no opportunity to be in touch with nature at large. Many have never seen the British countryside. Contact with nature at large plays no part in Fung and her husband's lives. They do not know where to go, and their children will remain city-bound.

Traumatized by years of war, and reduced to a position in which the concern for anything which does not contribute to her mere survival is a privilege, Fung has shown that people can still retain the capacity for the appreciation and enjoyment of natural beauty. We should remember the vast numbers of people whose lives find a continuity with this desperate scenario. Many groups here and across the world feel that the privilege of concern is 'not for the likes of us', from those who live on land strewn with landmines to those living in poverty in appalling deprivation in wealthy countries, or simply, many of those who work for a basic living within a perceived framework of personal powerlessness and disconnectedness to issues which deeply affect the quality of their lives.

Fung and Kin are now safe as refugees in this country. Access to the countryside, visits to nature reserves and areas of natural beauty can certainly contribute significantly to their healing as persons, and to the quality of their lives in general. Given the opportunity, such contact can lay down the basis for the motivation to engage in environmental participation. There are vast potential energies yet to be released from our ethnic communities, which will form a significant contribution to environmental care.

### **A vast missing contribution**

Fung and Kin have never been in touch with an environmental organisation. They are typical of hundreds of thousands of people who are unlikely to contribute to the care of nature, whether it is working for the survival of plants and animals, or for the quality of the air they breathe. They have no access to the enjoyment of the wider environment. They have no information or resources for action. They have no influence over the qualities of the immediate environment in which they live. As a consequence of living in some of the worst local environments, we should note that many of our ethnic communities retain an untapped drive to improve the quality of the environment.

The remaining natural areas exist only under the protection of our social system. Their continued existence depend on the support of public opinion. At the moment, Fung and Kin are unlikely to lend their weight here.

The non-inclusion of the first generation arrivals in environmental participation creates an 'instant family tradition' of exclusion from contact with nature and environmental participation. As it is not part of his mother's life to be environmentally aware and involved, Kin is unlikely to experience family life as a normal entry point to environmental participation.

### ***What can we do ?***

#### **Facilitating environmental participation by newcomers belonging to ethnic communities**

I would like to return to the proposal that the coming together of thinking and feeling form an important part of the basis for action.

In common with many other non-participating groups in society, black and white ethnic community groups need facilitation to go through the same process of engagement with environmental participation.

The three major categories for environmental engagement for ethnic communities are:

1. The facilitation of access to the enjoyment and the use of elements of the natural environment.

This puts them in touch with nature at large and takes them through an experience which enables them to take up their rightful ownership of the environment, and creates the entry point for their engagement with the conservation, preservation and development of the natural environment.

This includes facilitating the use and enjoyment of nature reserves, activities within an outdoor setting, parkland, inner city nature reserves, canals, and an introduction to the small but vital elements which keep urban communities symbolically linked to nature, such as window boxes, pocket parks, school nature areas, community gardens and allotments.

It takes them through the following process:

- a. Facilitation of contact with nature leading to the love of nature
- b. Facilitation of environmental awareness of the elements of nature
- c. The coming together of the love of nature with the awareness of the threat to the environment brings about the motivation to protect and care for the environment, as it is normal and human to protect what we love. Significant community partnership by the committed can be furthered through partnership with environmental agencies.

2. The facilitation of ethnic communities to the contribution to the conservation, preservation and development of elements of the natural environment.

This includes contribution to the care of nature at large and involvement in the policy and management of natural areas. It includes the creation, management and development of

elements and areas within the urban setting symbolically and practically engaging people with nature at large.

This involves:

- a. Facilitation of access to information, expertise and resources with regard to the elements of the natural environment.
3. The improvement and development of the immediate environment in which ethnic communities live, and the contribution to sustainability through action within the personal lives of individuals.

This addresses issues such as litter, the awareness and understanding of energy issues, practical action such as insulation and recycling, the understanding and management of environmental risk such as air pollution.

This involves:

- a. Facilitation of access to information, expertise and resources.
- b. Enabling the acquirement of the skills needed, such as the interpretation of technical data, with regard to the management of the aspects of their immediate environment.

In addition to the above, the approach taken to involve ethnic communities need to be socially and culturally relevant. Issues of empowerment, community development, and the potential for economic engagement and community enterprise need to be integrated with environmental participation.

### **A working definition of 'community'**

Many different definitions for 'community' have been proposed which attempt to address different scenarios, adapted to the agendas and the perceived client groups of environmental organisations. I would like to propose a working definition which actually diagnoses the various scenarios which are encountered:

*A community is a web of relationships defined by a significant level of mutual care and commitment.*

Coming back yet again to the proposal that the coming together of thinking and feeling can lead to action or non-action, pro-active environmental organisations will take action to involve ethnic communities in environmental participation only if they think and feel that :

1. Ethnic communities are an integral part of the community in a multi-cultural Britain.
2. There is an essential and significant missing contribution yet to be made by ethnic communities, especially in the context of globally and locally relevant actions.
3. As British citizens, the members of ethnic communities have a right to the access and enjoyment of the environment.
4. Ethnic communities have the right to be empowered to influence the quality of their environments, which are often of poor environmental quality.
5. They care about ethnic communities and are therefore committed to their well-being.
6. Environmental action has social and cultural meanings which are significant to ethnic communities.

Within the proposed definition of 'community', the pro-active organisations would need to see themselves as being within the community, working as part of it, rather than as an organisation working with a community outside itself.

Through the impact of the work of BEN, many organisations have begun to :

1. Instigate the beginnings of an organisational culture change in relation to working with ethnic communities.

2. Acquire awareness and skills to work effectively and meaningfully with ethnic communities.
3. Create new ways of working with ethnic communities, especially in the area of interpretation.

These are done with a view to :

1. Undo some of the harm that has been done in the non-recognition and isolation of the presence within society of communities stemming from different countries of origin.
2. To build up a relationship of mutual care and commitment, with a focus on engendering partnerships for environmental care and sustainable development.

Some of the significant themes which arise in working with ethnic communities are:

1. The creation of a sense of belonging and ownership of this country by ethnic communities.
2. The recognition of the relevance, importance and richness of different cultural interpretations of life, and in particular of nature, in a multi-cultural world.
3. Sustainable development means working towards an integrated society and subsequently an integrated world. The outlook we undertake and the behaviour of each of us affects the future of the world and therefore changes all our lives.
4. The promotion of multi-culturalism as a challenge to racism, and as a contribution to national civil harmony and world peace.

### ***Into the future***

#### **Sustainability and an integrated approach to environmental participation**

Much of British culture is still dominated by a puritanical attitude, in which work and play have exclusive dividing lines. Work is seen to be what we should and must do.

It is still early days for many organisations to shift away from recruiting people to their limited agenda through converting people to causes rather than by inspiring them. The manner in which their agendas are framed are in the main restrictive and strait-jacketed, making it difficult for the necessary multi-faceted, innovative and dynamic approaches to community participation to be possible.

The normal unpredictability of the progress of community involvement, with its ebbs and flows of levels of interest and target oriented achievements alongside the fulfilment of enjoyment, social and cultural meaning within a vast range of activities, has seen many organisations flounder in their commitment to this road.

This state of affairs is the result of the failure to appreciate that everything we do with people can only survive and develop as part of people's lives. There is a lack of faith in the cumulative effect of the varying levels of contribution of the years of people's lives, stretching into the future, carried by their inspired wish to remain environmentally engaged. A commercialised organisational culture of instant target ticking does not key well into the need for investment in a process which unfolds at its own specific pace.

With Local Agenda 21 there is a slow dawning of consciousness that with the enveloping and overwhelming themes we need to deal with, there can be no solution through the target ticking efforts of formal organisations. The solution lies with mass involvement through the power intrinsic in the way people live their personal lives, with the turning on of each light switch, with each step to the local shop. There is no power through control, but there is the subtle power of being related and in touch. A sea change in organisational culture needs to happen - they need to care and therefore act, and others will respond and care and act.

Within the concept of sustainable development, we can only take an integrated approach to environmental participation in which everything has a niche for environmental care and every environmental action is a social and cultural action.

Working with ethnic communities has shown us that we cannot work with these groups of people unless we recognise who they are, unless we make the effort to understand their concerns and make our work relevant to each others' lives. Those who have become environmentally involved have done so only because they wish to be involved, because we demonstrated that we care about them and created opportunities through which they have become engaged with the environment. This field of work has highlighted an area of knowledge which we can use to involve any non-participating group in sustainable development. The key to successful involvement is to build up a web of relationships in which there is a significant level of mutual care and commitment, with a focus on environmental themes.

Freud, drawing from the experience of the rigid society of his time, concluded that there are 2 great areas in our lives - Love and Work. A major theme for the more fluid searching society of our century is to reunite these divided themes - to consciously make love and work the same thing. Work needs to be the expression of our care for each other, locally and globally.

Sustainable development means the laying down of a way of assuring the future of this entire planet. It is about global harmony and co-operation within the commitment to human needs and to our planetary setting for all life. The rectification of the isolation of ethnic communities in this country is symptomatic of the road we are to take on. Let's start on this road at home, drawing together the multi-faceted fabric of our society . We will then be well on our way, because through our ethnic communities, home is also the world.

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*Featuring contributions from many leading figures in the fields of community participation and sustainable development, this book shows how participation can extend democracy, citizenship and accountability. It also considers the role of science and expert knowledge in setting and achieving appropriate goals for development, and describes how participatory initiatives can inspire sustainable action on poverty and social inclusion.*