

**Working with Black Environment Network for
Ethnic Participation and Representation**

Summary of a presentation by BEN to the National Assembly for Wales. April'02

Why is Black Environment Network unique as a representative organisation of ethnic communities ?

We are unique in the way we are positioned. We are not about simply working directly with ethnic groups but about stimulating involvement in various sectors in order to place ethnic engagement within mainstream organisations and society - where it belongs. We are a catalyst for change. Our ultimate measure of success is to do ourselves out of a job !

Although our remit is focused on ethnic participation within the built and natural environment sectors, our methodology is applicable to bringing forward ethnic participation from any sector. We are therefore a spearhead for social inclusion.

What is the background to the work of BEN ?

Most mainstream organisations pledge to be open to everyone, but in practice the groups now identified as socially excluded, including ethnic communities, have not been on their agenda.

Most ethnic groups live in some of the worst environments. The resources of the environmental sector are enormous but they have not had access to them. This scenario will find its parallel in many other sectors.

BEN has 16 years of experience proactively working to open up the resources - information, expertise, support and grants - of the built and natural environment sectors to ethnic communities. Our latest theme of engagement is environmental heritage.

How does BEN work to achieve ethnic participation ?

BEN's UK Office is in Llanberis, North Wales. We have project offices in Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Swansea, and London.

The focus of our work is infrastructural. Our methodology encompasses working with both mainstream organisations and ethnic communities to bring them together.

Putting ethnic participation and representation on the agenda of target sectors

Social inclusion is now a high priority for government, and organisations are now legally required to address it. The work of BEN is over a decade ahead of this. We work consistently to promote awareness and understanding of the value of ethnic participation and representation.

Putting the sectoral themes of engagement on the agenda of ethnic communities

Through years of neglect, many themes of engagement do not appear on the agenda of ethnic communities. The work of BEN involves systematically introducing and promoting a range of themes of engagement. Many themes can initially be experienced as remote and irrelevant by ethnic communities. A vital part of our work involves nurturing ethnic groups to see how engaging with these themes can make a significant impact on their lives, and how they can also make a culturally specific contribution to the range of mainstream activities on their own terms. It is about being able to frame and re-frame themes on their own terms.

Providing training to mainstream organisations

- BEN works across different sectors with a focus on environmental participation. At the moment we are involved with the environment, health, housing and heritage sectors.
- BEN offers awareness raising workshops and assistance in organisational culture change.
- BEN offers tailored as well as off the shelf training modules to assist organisations to gain the necessary awareness and skills to work effectively with ethnic groups.

Supporting mainstream organisations

BEN offers advice and consultancy services to assist organisations across a range of developments including:

- identifying kick-start opportunities to engage ethnic groups
- assessing programmes of activities, educational and promotional materials, and other resources so that they are socially and culturally relevant
- facilitating contact with ethnic groups
- advising on the formulation of pilot projects involving the views of ethnic groups

Kick-starting ethnic engagement in target areas

BEN has initiated kick-start projects in parts of the country . It involves :

- reaching out to ethnic groups and introducing an area of engagement new to them.
- enabling access to a range of information, and new activities
- working with them to assist them in formulating activities and projects which express their needs and assisting them to access the advice, information, and resources. Groups which are empowered are able to do so on their own terms and contribute against the background of their own uniqueness. Disempowered groups need support so that they do not end up being folded back into project types which reflect and serve the ways of life of other mainstream groups.

How does the work of BEN stand out from other ethnic organisations ?

Although many ethnic organisations do important work with ethnic groups, most of them are yet to embark on introducing their clients to new areas of engagement . These have not deliberately developed their skills and resources to assist mainstream organisations to work effectively with ethnic groups. BEN has made placing ethnic participation and representation within the mainstream its main remit. It therefore also has a role to play , as example or mentor, or in stimulating interest among ethnic organisations in this area of work.

What are some of reasons why BEN has been so successful ?

- BEN works in a non-confrontational ways, encouraging, supporting and collaborating constructively with mainstream organisations seeking to discover how they can re-position themselves re social inclusion.
- BEN works imaginatively , enabling excitement and enjoyment to motivate progress. BEN believes that interest and fun is a measure of the success of community involvement.
- BEN has a UK-wide network of individuals and organisations working for change. Many of our 600 members are themselves networks. Our member numbers multiply into thousands. BEN is therefore able to draw on an extensive and diverse membership as a resource.
- BEN is able to work to facilitate contact and involvement of ethnic groups due to its strong relationships with ethnic communities.
- BEN is able to represent ethnic groups and contribute effectively to consultations and influence policy at all levels. From day to day, it has its finger on the pulse re ethnic issues and concerns.

For more information about BEN, see our website www.ben-network.org.uk