



Home Truths

Undoing racism and delivering
real diversity in the charity sector

Executive Summary

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Introduction

The charity sector has a problem with racial and ethnic diversity. Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic (BAME) people are under-represented in the sector and those who are in charities can be subject to racism and antagonism not faced by white colleagues.

The sector is not alone in the relatively negative position of BAME people within it. This situation is a feature of wider society. However, the issue seems especially problematic in the charity sector because it is expressly built on commitments to justice and equality.

Living up to its positive values means that there are times when the charity sector needs to hear some home truths about where it has fallen short. This report reveals some of the failings of the 'mainstream' charity sector on diversity, equity and inclusion and suggests that these issues can only be meaningfully addressed by engaging in questions of racism. However, our research indicates that some charity leaders who are white have much further to go to understand racism and to help to overturn it.

More positively, there appears to be an appetite for progress. And this report is intended to provide a supportive framework for those who want real change. The report lays out steps both to further open up the charity sector to BAME people and to reorientate charity work towards building a racially just society.

This report is not about finger-pointing and blame: it is about accepting responsibility for what needs to be done. We hope it is a timely intervention to help the charity sector to move beyond warm words on diversity and on to meaningful action.

The project

To avoid being 'just another' diversity report, there are some points of difference from previous work in this area. We have sought to reframe the diversity debate so that rather than saying that the charity sector has a ('racial') diversity problem, we say that racism is a significant and unresolved issue in the charitable sector just as it is in the rest of society.

We define racism as ordinary and pervasive, a thread that runs through everyday life. Specifically, we say that racism exists where *harm* is caused to BAME people by *actions* in which *race-based thinking* is a significant factor. In the charity sector this can manifest in 'difficulties' relating to, engaging with and supporting BAME people, including BAME people in the charity workforce.

We also take the approach that the discussion on diversity in charities must centre the experience, knowhow and insights of BAME people in and around the charity sector. We prioritise this way of doing things because, somewhat paradoxically, discussions about insufficient racial and ethnic diversity often exclude or limit input from BAME people.

Key findings

This project draws on a number of important data sources, including a background literature review; an online survey with almost 500 responses from BAME people in the charity sector; 24 in-depth interviews, 13 with charity leaders (including two BAME) and 11 with BAME charity staff. Two roundtable discussions also took place. One was with 'system-shapers', including representatives of funders and infrastructure/membership bodies with influence on diversity priorities within the sector. The second was with racial justice advocates and activists, to explore connections between diversity, anti-racism and race equity.

The participants sharing their experiences in this project were largely self-selecting rather than drawn up as a 'representative sample'. We therefore cannot say that their experiences, perspectives and insights reflect those of wider BAME populations in charities. That said, the ►

◀ accounts of life in the charity sector provided by BAME project participants are rich, textured and troubling.

In particular, our online survey of BAME people showed that racism was a significant feature of their charity life:

68% of respondents

(335 out of 489 people) said that they had experienced, witnessed or heard stories about racism in their time in the charity sector

50% of respondents

(246 people out of 490) felt that they needed to 'tone down' behaviour or to be on their 'best behaviour' in order to fit in in the charity sector

In terms of direct experiences of racism:

222 people

had been subject to ignorant or insensitive questioning about their culture or religion

147 people

had been treated as an intellectual inferior

114 respondents

had been subject to excessive surveillance and scrutiny by colleagues, managers or supervisors

These experiences cause harm. One-hundred and sixteen people stated that direct experiences of racism had had a negative or very negative impact on their health and emotional wellbeing.

And a further 94 respondents who had experienced racism said that it had had a negative or very negative impact on their 'desired career path'.

Our findings demonstrate that the problem in the charity sector is not simply an absence of BAME people. Once inside the sector, significant numbers of BAME people experience discrimination and harm. Our research suggests that this situation is linked to the prevailing culture of the sector. By this we mean that long-standing habits, practices and norms will have to change in order to improve how the charity sector works with and serves BAME people.

However, our research also shows that while charity leaders who are white see the problem of a lack of ethnic diversity in the sector, they are concerned about saying or doing the wrong thing on 'race'. This fear seems to be underpinned by a lack of understanding about and engagement with the realities of racism. For example, in our project, racism was discussed in the main by charity leaders and system-shapers in abstract terms, rather than as a set of arrangements that they can challenge and undo. There was little or no focus on institutional racism, or on how paternalism or colonial thinking can disadvantage BAME people in the charity sector.

Diversity, equity and inclusion

While there may be a focus in the charity sector on attaining more racial and ethnic diversity, our evidence suggests that a lack of diversity cannot be overcome without a commitment to engaging with racism. It also requires practical action to create conditions inside the charity sector for BAME people to enter, to stay and to thrive. This is why inclusion and equity are important.

Inclusion refers to actions that invite and support 'difference' in a setting. An inclusive organisation enables all of its people to fully participate in and shape the collective, e.g. by supporting people to be themselves and to speak out about concerns and to be heard.

Equity-based approaches emphasise that different populations are differently situated in society. For example, the lives of BAME people may be shaped by various factors – including racism. As a result, to even out racial disparities – for example in a recruitment process – it may be necessary to treat people differently based on how they are positioned in society, rather than treating and judging everyone as the same. This may mean supporting BAME charity people and prospective charity people differently from white counterparts so that a workplace can be made more diverse and inclusive. ▶

< Recommendations

Progress in the charity sector requires strategies for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The recommendations below attempt, in different ways, to instigate cultural change in how charities engage with BAME people – from addressing racism to changing everyday practice. The emphasis is not only on diversifying the workforce, i.e. on who does the work. Transformation in this area will be reflected in everything charities do: from how they work to what they do in wider society to target and enhance outcomes for BAME people.

Recommendations for the sector collectively (including charities, infrastructure bodies, funders and regulators)

1. Redefine racism as ordinary, systemic and institutional
2. Conduct an annual sector-wide 'BAME Barometer' survey to capture BAME experience in charities
3. Develop independent or third-party mechanisms for reporting and addressing racism in charities
4. Develop a plan on the use of regulation to accelerate DEI progress

Recommendations for organisational policy

1. Integrate explicit race equity goals into charitable work
2. Report publicly on internal DEI targets
3. Publish ethnicity pay gap data
4. Change recruitment criteria, e.g. value attributes differently, including lived experience and alignment with institutional vision
5. Invest in supporting and safeguarding BAME charity people, including proper complaints procedures
6. Work with and pay BAME DEI specialists to improve practice

Recommendations for CEOs and senior leaders

1. Learn more about racism and current anti-racist thinking
2. Take responsibility for learning how racism can manifest in your organisation
3. CEOs (with board chairs) should lead on and be held responsible and accountable for progress on DEI targets

Recommendations for funders

1. Invest in a DEI Transformation Fund geared to BAME-led initiatives
2. Become more interventionist in supporting charity sector DEI culture and practice, including making changes to application criteria to prioritise racial justice work

Conclusion

This report marks out a pathway to transform the charity sector. However, to date, DEI rhetoric is ahead of action to such an extent that it can lead to frustration and even despair about the prospects for progress. And yet, there appears to be an appetite for real change, among BAME charity people and among a growing, possibly critical, mass of influential white charity people and institutions. This is the time to act, for the charity sector to centre BAME people and for DEI to be reflected in who is in the sector and what the sector is trying to achieve.

ACEVO and Voice4Change are committed to doing more to deliver DEI through our work together and as individual organisations. We also want to work openly and constructively with others – particularly infrastructure bodies – who are seeking to advance DEI practice. ACEVO and Voice4Change also recognise that we do not have all the answers and that we too must be open to scrutiny in our DEI interventions.

We look forward to the work ahead. ■



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