

Roundtable on race equality and migrant organisations working together and on engaging young people

On 22 July 2014 16 people from race equality and from migrant organisations met to discuss three issues:

- How can race equality NGOs support the rise of migrant community activism?
- How can traditional anti-racism organisations connect with and engage younger people?
- What role for the UK Race and Europe Network (UKREN)?

This report describes the discussion, without naming any of the participants.

Race equality and migrant activism

Some of the participants noted that the needs of established communities in the UK, particularly in rural areas, were being sidelined by the needs of recent migrants that were placing pressure on services and funding. Migrants were viewed as a higher priority and this created tension in forming solidarity between traditional race equality organisations and new migrant groups. From the new migrant perspective they often did not have well established NGOs (most organisations were run by volunteers) and lacked the capacity to campaign. They needed more support from race equality organisations.

The situation was exacerbated by a cross-party political rhetoric that was against migration under the mantra that “good race relations depends on tight migration”. Yet this anti-immigration sentiment was increasing racism against all ethnic and national groups. All groups were being typecast as migrants, regardless of place of birth. Under the Immigration Act, racial profiling will increase in a process that regards anyone who appears to be from an ethnic or non-British national group as a migrant. It was mentioned that it was important not to fall into the trap of dividing Black, Asian and Migrant groups. Ethnicity is being named and framed by the British government in a ‘divide and rule’ policy. There was a historical context. The government’s ‘Go Home’ van campaign in 2013 stoked up memories among established communities from 50 years ago when they were recent migrants to the UK. NGO activism against the ‘Go Home’ vans brought together established communities and recent migrants. This was an opportunity to bring people together behind a common cause in solidarity. NGOs also need to get better at engaging younger people and women in anti-racism activism.

There were commonalities of experience between race activists, new migrants and trade unions. We needed to share problems and create partnerships, making time and the opportunity to bring people together on specific issues faced by race, faith and migrant groups, even though the contexts were different. There was also a recognition that racism sometimes came from within ethnic and national groups. Racists feel they can talk about immigration in a racist way and that it is not racism because the object of their vitriol are ‘white people’. Solutions needed to be found to the question of how we can link race and migration within the context of race equality. We miss a political narrative and the connections between people.

Engaging younger people in race equality

School-aged children in metropolitan areas had a real engagement with multiculturalism. Music such as rap was engaging them in race issues. But building a street movement with protests and demonstrations was not engaging enough to young people. Where political activity happens is not where young people are. Politics was viewed as staid and old fashioned. One needs to engage young people on their terms, at festivals, music gigs and on social media. Things had changed over the generations with far less community spaces now, which has led to cyber space being used by young people. Although some things change, some things remain the same. Could NGOs

regain the popular activism around the Rock Against Racism movement in the 1980s? Some ideas were put forward on how to do engage young people:

- make the project relevant and accessible to young people, such as the 'End racism this generation' campaign with different ways to engage supporters
- the National Union of Students (NUS) membership card was seen by students as bringing benefits. How can one use this to increase interest in anti-racism work and in voter mobilisation?
- students want to add work experience to their CVs. Can race equality organisations offer this and engage a wider group of young people?
- online activism organisations like 38 Degrees were popular with young people. Could NGOs persuade 38 Degrees or Avaaz to take up a racism incident as a cause?
- Could race equality NGOs make more use of online petitions for causes with a wide appeal, like Stop and Search policies, using the government, local authority or campaigning organisations like change.org's petition sites?
- Could computer games and apps be a vehicle for engaging young people in anti-racism issues?

Role for UKREN

UKREN as network that bridged traditional anti-racism organisations and new migrant groups around the benefits of Europe to race equality was seen to be well placed. But the idealism of Europe - a community of different cultures, nationalities and languages all underpinned by the rule of law - was seeing human rights slowly being stripped away by Member States.

The roundtable raised more questions than solutions, and the initiative risked being a conversation without action. How does one make it real and relevant to organisations and young people? How do we turn Europe and racism into campaigning issues in which people find common cause and solidarity and want to participate? Is it around the rising right wing in Europe and racist statements by politicians, for example by the Polish MEP using racist language in a European Parliament debate, that could be a campaigning issue that 38 degrees might take up?

It was noted that LGBT rights had been transformed thanks to Europe. Could anti-racism achieve the same change?

Europe and immigration will be key general election issues. NGOs need to show communities how important Europe is and why it is valuable to race equality; need to mobilise people, especially young people; and need to find the middle ground so as not to alienate some by appearing to be radicalising. UKREN and other race equality organisations need to campaign for the maintenance of European social policy, that the UK should remain bound by the European Convention on Human Rights; and that moves to limit free movement were short sighted.

It was proposed to hold a workshop at different locations across the UK, aimed at young people, as a partnership between UKREN, its members and New Europeans around the theme 'What have you got to lose'.