

Forum of African Immigrant Associations:
Workshop on Collaboration Among African Community-Based Organisations

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The lively discussion of the participants in this workshop can be clustered around three themes: Sharing, Building Community, and Strategies.

I. Sharing Information and Skills

It was striking to the participants that when they introduced themselves they found that their organizations overlapped considerably in their aims, even though their specific national or focus group was different. This meant they shared challenges, but that they also could share information and skills with each other. Participants felt that coming together and expressing their individual and organizational concerns about lack of resources, time or capacity with each other made them realize that a problem was not just their problem, 'but a New York problem' as one participant put it. Seeing a problem as a shared one could mean seeing the responsibility for solving a problem also as shared. It could mean acting together to solve a problem. And this would be a more effective strategy than each organization trying to solve certain problems on their own. Particularly when it came to addressing city, state and federal level issues which faced all African immigrants, working together would prove more effective.

It was also noted that the members of organizations offer different skills and competencies in the African community. And these strengths could be shared between organizations, for example, where legal advice is needed when it comes to immigration status, or refugee concerns. Much of the human capacity in the African immigrant community was being under utilized, and better coordination amongst organizations could facilitate more effective use of what the community has to offer.

II. Building New Communities

One of the serious challenges facing organizations, participants noted, was the problems their members faced in having to adjust to being in a new and unfamiliar environment. Particular challenges were highlighted. One participant pointed out that many refugees and immigrants from Africa come from situations of conflict and their trust has been eroded. They therefore tend to confine themselves to those from the same country or ethnic or language group. Even to get people to participate in these communities took time since they needed to learn to trust others from within their state, or others whom they shared a conflicted history with, as in the case of civil wars. Forming organizations was a good way to help people form new communities. And it also offered the possibility of bringing different organizations together to widen the sense of community so as to encompass and foster a broader African solidarity.

Another serious challenge facing cooperation amongst organizations were the differences of language. This challenge would have to be worked out as organizations try to increase cooperation on common concerns.

There were also different cultural practices within African communities which could prove divisive and organizers needed to be sensitive to the plurality of these practices. Some members felt that groups should come together around identities that were not divisive, like religion or ethnicity, but rather around those identities that unified, like 'women's forums' to discuss common concerns and interests of African women immigrants.

Participants also noted that cooperation amongst organizations took dedication, time and effort of individual office bearers and members. Increased cooperation would need to be done in such a way as to not create many new bureaucratic duties which would undermine the long term sustainability of working together since members would be overburdened.

III. Strategies

Cooperation should be fostered at two levels, participants felt. The first level was between organizations in their working together on common problems. This would involve interaction amongst leaders of organizations. It was suggested that organizations could invite representatives of other organizations to introduce themselves at the regular meetings general meetings. This would solve the problem of creating too many committees and meetings since it would fit into an existing schedule of meetings.

Another level at which cooperation needed to be fostered was between members of organizations. These could be done through social forums, like getting together to share food from different countries within Africa. This kind of gathering would create a space for people to get to know each other, to build trust, and to share with each other their skills and experiences. As one participant put it, when it comes to networking, 'the personal is more powerful'.

Building on the directory of African immigrant associations was also very important, participants felt. If the directory contained more detailed profiles of each organization, like the services they offered, their particular strengths, etc, it would foster cooperation. If the members of one organization needed a service, it would be easier to find someone who could help if there was a directory that was easily accessible that was available.