

**FORUM FOR AFRICAN IMMIGRANT ASSOCIATIONS
SATURDAY, 22 MARCH 2003**

Opening Plenary Session

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Welcome

Welcome remarks were given by Linda Beck,, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Barnard College and Acting Director of the Institute of African Studies, Columbia University. Prof. Beck spoke of how conversations with Kim Nichols the African Services Committee gave birth to the idea of organizing a forum at which leaders of African immigrant associations could meet to discuss how they could collaborate and network for more effective lobbying. With this agenda in mind, Prof. Beck, along with Greg Mann (History, Columbia University) and Ousmane Kane (School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia) included a small budget for the Forum in a grant they wrote for the Muslims in New York Project, which is funded by the Ford Foundation through the Middle East Institute at Columbia University. In writing the proposal, the argument was that before we could know something about African Muslims in New York City, we must know something about the larger African community.

The first step in organizing the forum was to compile a list of African Immigrant Associations. Invitations were then mailed to all of the associations (many were returned as undeliverable, attesting in some way to the fluidity of some of associations). In fall, meeting with those who had responded began in an attempt to set the agenda for the forum. All in all, two meeting were held before settling on the current agenda. As such, it is quite clear that the forum reflects the concerns raised by the African immigrant community.

In settling on the agenda, the rationale of those who participated in the two plenary meeting was that “it would largely be a waste of time simply talk about the issues, problems, or constraints” facing African Immigrant Associations. These are known already. Rather, groups wanted a platform a which they could discuss strategies for dealing with concerns around legal status, health care, domestic violence, education, housing and so forth.

With the broad framework of the agenda set, the organizers then had to decide on how best to discuss these strategies. The program reflects a combination of plenary sessions in which the presentations by speakers could serve as a catalyst for further discussion, and workshops lead by facilitators with a background that would permit them to be a resource and encourage discussion among participants.

In welcoming participants to the forum, Prof. Beck concluded by emphasizing that the forum was not intended to create a new organization as there already many African

immigrant associations, but rather to provide a context in which networking among these groups could be encouraged.

Opening Remarks from Asfaha Hadera, Co-Executive Director of the African Services Committee

The idea of the conference was for immigrant associations to evaluate their potential as Africans. Hadera spoke of the need for African immigrant associations to link with African-Americans and what they have to offer (organizational strength, etc.). Also suggested that one of the questions immigrant associations in the US have to answer was in what ways can new arrivals to the United State affect politics back home? One of the objectives of the conference would be to discuss ways in which this could be done.

Panel on Strategies

The plenary session on strategies proved to be the catalyst organizers had intended it to be. It began with presentations on capacity building for community based organizations, collaboration among African community based organizations, networking with political officials, and transnational networking by the invited panelists and then opened to the floor for comments and questions. Below, I summarize some of the main points raised by the panelists before turning to the vibrant question and answer session.

A. Capacity Building (Denise Williams, Community Resource Exchange)

According to Ms. Williams, capacity building is about realizing potential as an association. That is, capacity building is about making sure that the internal system that supports the organization is in place. As such, continued Ms. Williams, organizations are always trying to ratchet-up their structures to meet the demands of a changing community. Ms. Williams spoke of five key elements of capacity building: fund-raising (said to be the most teachable), financial management (about the strategic use of resources), human resource management (about how to treat employees), strategic planning, and project/program evaluation (about measuring the effect/impact of programs).

B. Collaborations (Margie McHugh, New York Immigration Coalition)

Ms. McHugh began her presentation on collaboration among African community based organizations by noting that New York is so different from other cities and thus creates the imperative for collaboration. She noted that diversity in New York creates a dynamic that has to be understood by groups. For instance, immigrants associations have to be aware that they are seen as a monolithic group by many of the people in government. Thus, have to be careful of a divide and conquer strategy. As such, immigrant groups need to be politically savvy in dealing with politicians. Overall, she argued that collaboration had the following benefits: it can magnify issues, it can

magnify the legitimacy of agendas, and it allows groups to leverage what is already going-on and avoids the problem of double programming.

C. Networking with Political Officials (Matthew Tollin, New York City Council)

Matthew Tollin's presentation on networking with political officials was framed around what he saw as the major waves of African immigration to the United States. The first wave he characterized as the movement of African students to the United States for study. This wave included people like Kwame Nkurumah. According to Mr. Tollin, the current wave of immigration is more traditional in nature (suggesting based on larger global trends). His main argument in highlighting these waves of immigration was that the history of African immigration to the United States is important for the legitimacy of immigrant groups in the country. Along the same lines, Mr. Tollin suggested that recent immigrant associations would benefit greatly from an affinity with existing groups (church structures, unions, and local government officials, etc.,).

D. Transnational Networking (Edouard Aho-Glele, United Nations Permanent Mission of the Republic of Benin)

Edouard Aho-Glele began with some discussion of predicament of underdevelopment in Africa. The reason for this became clear when he argued that anything that immigrant communities in the United States can do would have an impact on a continent said to have needs that governments alone cannot easily meet. Edouard Aho-Glele suggested that the situation could be reversed by placing emphasis on the role of civil society in development. The problem however, was that NGO's in Africa lacked the resources to do this effectively. As such, he called for groups based in the United States to boost the effectiveness of groups in Africa. These two NGO's would be link through transnational networks.

Following the presentations by the panel, a very lively question and answer session ensued. Below are some of the Comments and/or Questions raised by the floor.

- Comment: "I do not feel like we need to apologize for emigrating." Suggested that immigration function imbalances. At any rate, immigrants send money back home, which sometimes is greater than GNP. Expressed concern about having money sent home controlled by the government. Through private returns, money could go directly towards paying for fees, etc., and not get lost through "bureaucratic corruption." The concern with corruption was expressed by a number of participants. They were skeptical about sending their resources back through state structures. "From my experience it's always difficult when agencies outside raise money and send it home through the state. It does not always get to the right people." Participants seemed unconvinced by Mr. Aho-Glele's argument that private remittances could not be integrated into the larger development strategy of governments in Africa. Instead, a number of questions and comments

suggested that “most Africans wish to go back home and invest but the political situation makes it difficult.” Thus the questions and comments in response to Mr. Aho-Glele’s presentation signaled participants’ sentiments about politics in the countries. However, after a continued back and forth regarding the political situation in Africa, some participants expressed their discomfort with the questions being asked of the panelists. They argued that fairer questions for the panelists would be “how can you help to organize to achieve our goals?” The point here seemed to be that participants should not be looking for the panelists to solve their problems.

- Question to Matthew Tollin: “Africa has the highest number of refugees. Are there any plans to increase the number of African refugees in the US?” Mr. Tollin response was that admittance of refugee was not a Council question but a federal question.
- General Question: I am concerned with the education of immigrants. “Are there any after-school programs to help integrate kids into the public school system?” “How do we help people who are waiting for hearing to education?” Ms. McHugh informed the forum that her organization, the New York Immigration Coalition, runs such after school programs.
- Question to Denise Williams: “Does your organization help other NGO’s with training and other areas of interest?” Response: Yes
- General Question: “Is there any chance of amnesty being granted to the many undocumented African immigrants in the US?”