



The Green and Black Ambassadors: Opening up a dialogue

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During 2015, the city of Bristol delivered an extensive programme of activity around its role as the European Green Capital, the first British city to win this accolade. Despite numerous activities aimed at diverse communities, the year was perceived as failing to crack through the long-standing black and minority ethnic inclusion issues that affect the city of Bristol and other European cities as well as much of the global 'green' movement. Given these concerns, our organisations jointly established the Green and Black Programme of activity; we convened a variety of workshops with BME leaders in Bristol, foregrounding their experiences, perceptions and knowledge. These leaders argued that despite 'well-meaning' efforts, many implicit assumptions and behaviours of the environmental 'in-crowd', including choosing venues that were perceived as 'off-limits' and last-minute planning, effectively disenfranchised members of marginalised communities. One contributor stated: 'We were invited but typically too late to shape the agenda.' Such critiques are also applicable to University engagement ambitions, given the acknowledged lack of ethnic minority diversity in many academic institutions and especially in the Earth and environmental sciences. This marginalisation makes it difficult to entrain the alternative voices needed to develop an ongoing dialogue about environmental and climate change research that appeals to, connects to and learns from the experiences of Britain's BME communities. To address this, we created the Green and Black Ambassadors Programme. This programme had several goals, all of which are broadly relevant to efforts to create a more inclusive discipline: 1) Initiating a dialogue with BME communities to identify new and vital research directions, inspired by their concerns, needs, experience and knowledge; 2) exploring the ways in which environmental research resonates with BME communities, revealing opportunities for stronger, more relevant and more inspiring sharing of our findings; 3) creating balance in the conversation by recognising and providing a platform for the initiatives arising in marginalised communities (and contesting the assumption that lack of engagement with our projects means lack of engagement with these topics); and 4) providing training and mentoring to the next generation of leaders in these communities. Since its launch, two Ambassadors have engaged hundreds of citizens in Bristol and thousands more through a monthly radio broadcast on Ujima Radio. They have elevated the profile of BME-led efforts throughout the city and nation, subverting the narrative that such communities are not interested in sustainability issues. Finally, they have driven a challenging dialogue centred around institutional and structural biases; this required that we academics set aside our own agenda and instead participate in (and fund) a more critical conversation about ourselves and our institutions. With time, such an approach has produced the trust required for genuine co-production of learning and collaboration, creating stronger partnership and maximising the value of engagement.