

Mapping for activism

BAME community assets mapping in England: the evidence gathered by the Ubele Initiative

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The mapping exercises I am going to describe were undertaken between 2014 and 2015 as part of the research outcomes of the report [A Place To Call Home](#) by the [Ubele Initiative](#) supported by [Locality](#). This report, published in October 2015, offers an important overview of community asset ownership in the African Diaspora community in England and in the BAME communities in London.

The African diaspora community in England secured the management or the ownership of several community assets primarily during the 1980s and in general after periods of social unrest, when central and local governments recognised the need to empower those communities usually left at the margins of society. Since the 80s the picture has changed considerably and many of these community assets have been lost or are facing a very difficult time, constantly under the threat of closure due primarily to cuts, termination of leases or management problems.

Until this piece of research came out, there was only anecdotal evidence of this situation. The primary aim of this research, therefore, was to collect data and secure a solid evidence base on which to create some policy recommendations on how to save these important community spaces from closure. A range of quantitative and qualitative processes captured data from a total of 150 organisations. Research processes used included desk research, two online questionnaires and one-to-one structured interviews with a range of people, from on the-ground practitioners to nationally known social and community commentators.

Along with the analysis of the dataset and the production of the report itself, two mapping exercises were undertaken in order to clarify the results of the data collection. The first is a [Google map of 150 African Diaspora community assets across England](#) which are in existence, have been lost or are under threat. As this is a changing picture, the map can be added to or further refined over the coming years. The main aims of the map were to show the extent of the loss and to give information about the type of community assets surveyed.

The second mapping exercise resulted in an [audio map of London BAME community assets](#) which captures the stories of 13 BAME led community assets located in London, four of which have now closed. For each community asset, an interview was carried out with a key

representative of the space.¹ The map is intended to be updated with other interviews, so the number of assets mapped will increase. The map uses the open source platform [Leaflet](#). This map is the result of a joint effort by Ubele and [Just Space](#), which coordinated the work of five UCL planning students, who carried out the interviews with the community groups visible on the map.² The lengthy interviews were then edited down to an average length of ten minutes to give potential listeners a summarised version of the interviews.

There are multiple aims to this map. First, the map intends to raise awareness of the extent of the loss of community assets in London where community floorspace is constantly diminishing. Secondly, the interviews provide qualitative data about the reasons why community assets are under threat and the main challenges faced by community groups in relation to their management. Thirdly, the very act of getting these assets mapped is a political statement of the importance of these spaces. The people who have fought and worked to keep the assets within the community have a chance to share their views on a platform which has the potential to reach a wide audience.

The interviews followed the structure of Ubele's questionnaire as illustrated in the report. However, the focus of the interviews was on planning policy tools that can help community groups to protect community assets. The tools highlight the main challenges created by competing land uses in London. In particular, the evidence suggests that targeted and sustained support has not been offered to declining BAME organisations so that they can make use of tools such as the asset of community value designation, the community right to bid and other rights set out in the Localism Act 2011. The 2011 Act is one of the main legislative outcome of the big society agenda.

The findings of this set of interviews confirm those described elsewhere in the report. To summarise, it is apparent that

- Many BAME representatives feel that BAME communities should be actively reached out to in order to benefit from these opportunities. They feel that very few BAME communities have benefited from tools like the community right to bid.
- Economic sustainability is crucial for all the people interviewed. There is a shared need to establish a model, which makes community-led projects less dependent on external funding.
- Community-led organisations are often asked to justify and prove that they are trustworthy every time there is a change of staff in the council. This engenders a feeling of not being able to progress and frustrates aspirations.
- Some of the interviewees shared a lack of trust in the planning policy tools for protecting community assets. For instance, Ego Ahaiwe from Lambeth Women Project argues: "people can use them, but it really depends if the people with power want to use those tools too". Hiikmah from Africa Centre Rise Campaign asks "Is policy and legislation just scaffolding that can easily be gone behind?" This lack of trust was backed by some disheartening experiences with the planning system, which frustrated initial hopes of making use of those Localism Act tools. Some London BAME community assets managers and users have shown that the applications they have submitted to their local authorities for assets to be designated as assets of community value, have been ignored or refused on questionable grounds. In this context, it was suggested that an independent body should oversee applications for assets of community value and ensure that a dialogue with the local authority should take place. Furthermore, community-led projects should be able to access help in order to apply for judicial review if they think their local authority has

made an unlawful decision.

- Renewing leases or getting long-term leases is difficult, but they are essential to obtain funding.
- Long-term strategic thinking is needed about the management of assets, but people are usually too busy in the daily running of community groups and organisations.
- In some cases, the lack of a proper consultation of community asset users led to decisions that completely overlook communities' needs and aspirations.

Overall, the mapping exercises are important ways to raise awareness of the current situation of community assets and to empower communities by making the evidence they have gathered visible and publically available. The maps have been particularly helpful in writing up [Towards a community-led plan for London](#) published by Just Space in August 2016. In particular, they shaped the section dedicated to community spaces and the role that social impact assessments should play in the section of the Future London Plan which evaluates the contribution of London community spaces to inclusion of the rich diversity of its cultures and communities.

¹ List of interviewees: Elaine Holness (Director of Karibu Education Centre); Mike Garrick and Harry Powell (Volunteer Managers of Lewisham Sports Consortium); Devon Thomas (Co-director of Kennington Co-op Centre); Monique Baptiste-Brown (Black Cultural Archives Marketing & Development Relationship Manager); Ego Ahaiwe (Lambeth Women Project Co-coordinator and Youth Worker); Hiikmah (Africa Centre Rise Campaigner); Tony Brennan (Irish Centre Manager, Tottenham); Clasford Stirling (Broadwater Farm Youth & community developer); Mr Pepukayi (Founding Member of Operation Headstart bookshop, Tottenham); Gina Osbourne (Former Manager of Chestnuts Community Centre, Tottenham); Mr Elder Des (Board Member, West Indian Association of Service Personnel); Joseph Oladosu (Director of AfCD); Nuala Riddell Morales (Director of Carnaval del Pueblo).

² Louisa Barker; Meaghan Kelly; Isabel McCagg; Ketki Mudholkar; Chloe Treger (UCL MSc students AY 2015)