



African Initiative Support- Partnership and Collaboration

Background information about the RCO

African Initiative Support (AIS) is a voluntary and community organisation, founded in Nottingham in 2003 driven by 'new African' residents needs for culturally sensitive support to help them to access key services.

Summary of activities

AIS aims to relieve poverty, distress and improve the quality of life of Africans, particularly refugees and asylum seekers living in Nottingham and surrounding areas by providing services in the areas of: education and training; health promotion, orientation and advice, culture, other philanthropic activities.

Briefly describe the experience you wish to focus on in this paper.

The experience that AIS wishes to focus on in this paper is a research commissioned by us and that involved the majority of local African community groups - "African Community Skills and Needs Audit". This report, funded by One Nottingham and New Deals for Communities (NDC) in autumn 2009, was launched in April 2010 and presents the findings of a study researching the needs, skills and experiences of the African Community living in Nottingham. Its main purpose was to explore the experiences, skills and needs of the diverse local African community within the socio-economic context that defines it. The project was managed by AIS, as a leader organisation, alongside a steering group composed by members of the Nottingham African Community. For more than six months, several African and Refugee organisations were involved in this venture, participating and providing valuable information throughout the whole process (such as the Cameroon Support Group, Heri Kewtu, Nottingham Zimbabwean Community Network, Nottingham Congolese Community, Ethiopia Community Group, Somali Community Nottingham, PALOP Community, and the Sudanese Community in Nottingham).

During this period, the Steering Group have had the opportunity to meet on a regular basis, so to provide and receive an update of the research; it has negotiated, agreed and organised how the information would be collected and used in the report (questionnaires and focus groups).

In April 2010, a successful launch event was organised by AIS with the support of the other African community groups, where everyone had the opportunity to contribute for the celebration of the African culture, and, furthermore, for the accomplishment of this partnership.

Describe what your RCO did, and what came out of this

As the commissioner of this project, AIS supervised and coordinated the project as a whole. At an initial stage of the project, it contacted several African community groups, explaining the purpose of this project and its relevance for the community. It had the opportunity to approach its community leaders in an attempt to bring them "on board" this project, welcoming its opinions and suggestions, and also raising the awareness that together we can make a difference and we can "stand". Ultimately, AIS intended that this joint venture represent the beginning of a new and first stage in terms of community cohesion, engagement and participation in terms of policy-making decisions.

After having the commitment of some of the community groups contacted, an effort was put in place to regularly contact everyone involved, providing all the relevant information to all, to make it a very clear and accessible project. AIS coordinated the whole project, organising meetings, advertising the job posts available and the interviewing process, contacting other agencies involved, providing training to interviewers, seeking further funding and support from other local agencies/ community groups, among others.

As an outcome, AIS is proud to see that this pioneer joint project that counted with the participation of many local community groups, is still ongoing – the Steering Group continue to meets regularly, working on possible projects and further researches, exploring funding opportunities and seeking to build a stronger "voice" within the community. Currently, its aim is to find a possible legal structure for it, which can provide the group with a stronger and supportive position among other bigger community groups, and, simultaneously, preserving each groups authenticity and values.

What problems and barriers did your RCO face in doing this, and how did you overcome or try to overcome these?

The main issue that AIS has faced throughout this project was associated with the lack of commitment of some community members and also of communication. In what concerns the lack of commitment, it was possible to observe that some of the individuals that had agreed in actively being part of this research (as part of the Steering Group), were not present at the sessions. Despite many efforts by AIS, it was not always possible to have everyone at these sessions, which was due to many aspects (such as childcare arrangements, work commitments, lack of financial resources to pay travel expenses, as many individuals are from a very poor background). In order to tackle this issue, AIS was persistent in its contacts to community leaders, urging them to send representatives if they were not able to attend and pleading for a deeper involvement, so as to benefit not only the particular community but also in general. AIS also ensured that the meetings were held at a central location, reducing the costs of travelling for many (in some cases, it provided bus fare reimbursements for those in low income), and also after working hours/ childcare arrangements (although difficult to adapt it to everyone, attempts were made in order to accommodate the majority's schedule). Additionally, AIS certified that all groups would have access to the information discussed and agreed at the meetings, and also the relevant information concerning the project, enabling them to have a voice at any stage of this piece of work.

In terms of communication, AIS used all the means at its service, such as email and telephone calls. However, it is difficult to guarantee that everyone receives the information, as many of these contacts were not updated. Therefore, we also made many personal contacts, directly to community groups' offices and we counted on "word of mouth" to publicise the events/ meetings.

Do you have any tips for other RCOs considering doing something similar?

Bringing together several community groups, with a diverse background and needs, can be a very difficult task but not impossible. There must be, above all, understanding and respect for each other opinions and individual goals. Also, we believe that it is important to keep it "clear" and transparent, in what concerns the information; this must be accessible to all (effective communication) – it is vital to build a relationship of trust among all so that the goals that we propose to achieve together are attained successfully.

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