

A look at Bristol European Green Capital 2015 through African eyes.

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Organisers of European Green Capital 2015 have rightly insisted on making the “Inclusion” of vulnerable groups a priority for next year’s events, but this remains subject to some controversy across Bristol. It is still unclear whether Bristol’s socioeconomically deprived communities and the organisations representing their interests will benefit to the extent they should.

The first round of funding for projects was a partial step in that direction. Notably, African Voices Forum (AVF) secured £10,000 from the Small Grants fund, and 91 Ways to Build a Global City received £25,000, half of the money it bid for as a Strategic Grant. However, many other organisations working with marginalised groups who applied for funding were unsuccessful in their bids.

In a city where people of African descent account for 16% of the population, it is argued that these funds will have a very limited impact on making European Green Capital 2015 inclusive. Notably, the Inclusion group of Bristol Green Capital Partnership has highlighted the need for organisers of Bristol 2015 to identify weaknesses in coverage of the year’s events.

Despite general agreement that funding to raise awareness on environmental issues and sustainability was a good thing, leading representatives of local African-led community organisations interviewed felt that they have not been actively involved in environmental policy or decision making for Bristol European Green Capital 2015. They also expressed concerns over the benefits for local African communities.

In October 2014, the Green and Black Debate hosted by BCFM and Ujima Radio, which included a panel of representatives from the Council, Bristol Green Capital Partnership and Bristol 2015. A member of the audience spoke of the European Green Capital 2015 as *“an opportunity to challenge this sense of disengagement that is affecting a lot of communities across the city.”*

However, according to Jean Smith, MBE of Nilaari, *“in reality a lot of people still have no idea what (European Green Capital) entails... and the language of green capital does not draw attention”. “Nilaari’s involvement up until now has been minimal but I would consider raising related issues when the opportunity arises.”*

Hilary Banks, Chair of the Malcolm X Centre, said her organisation had not engaged with Bristol 2015 but welcomed the European Green Capital Award as positive for Bristol’s people of African descent. *“We are generally assumed to know little about environmental issues, although these are sometimes implicit in their lifestyles, e.g. of migrants from rural farming communities”.*

“People of colour living in socioeconomically deprived areas experience low employment, poor education, transport infrastructure and housing; along with pollution these are environmental indicators of poor quality of life”. She added, *“Funding should be used to build, share and disseminate*

knowledge in the mainstream on environmental issues and sustainability, e.g. to generate awareness of what other groups do to protect the environment.”

Addressing the schedule of the funding process, AVF’s Peninah Achien-Kindberg, also member of the Board of Directors of Bristol 2015, suggested poor publicity and lack of time for to prepare suitable bids meant there may have been more applicants from African Diaspora led organisations. She also stated, *“It is debateable that the amount of funding available is likely to generate awareness rather than have a greater impact.”*

In the meantime, AVF will collaborate with Bristol Energy Network to deliver training focusing on reducing fuel poverty and energy efficiency in African diaspora communities through workshops, and house-to-house visits.

With its funding, 91 Ways to build a global city aims to *“provide a focus for the cities minority communities to come together to discuss Green Capital issues over food”*, and green spaces in inner city areas such as Easton and St Paul’s. This should provide an opportunity for collaborations between environmental equality and social justice causes, to work together towards inclusive city wide urban sustainability.

Highlighting hope that some of the funding will eventually trickle down towards African Diaspora communities, Achien-Kindberg also commented that Sustrans will use some of its £44,100 to address the issue of transport as a strategic city-wide project which should include inner city areas, *“engaging people in debate and developing a transport vision for Bristol.”*

“Longstanding environmental issues such as traffic congestion and resulting pollution, have adversely affected health and wellbeing of children and adults living in Easton over the past eight years and need to be addressed,” according to Asher of Ujima Radio Station. He added, *“the monitoring of environmental pollution of inner city neighbourhoods such as Easton and St Pauls, is necessary for the health and wellbeing of children and adults living in these areas.”*

Mr Kunle Ogunnaike, a UWE student and otherwise lecturer in architecture at an African university, reinforced these statements, and spoke of the need to skill more local youths on issues of healthy living. *“Green Capital will definitely address the needs of local migrant communities if they are empowered”*, emphasising that *“skilled professionals were likely to benefit more than unskilled workers.”*

It is clear that expectations of Bristol European Green Capital’s inclusiveness need to happen in practice for individuals belonging to socioeconomically excluded African communities, if they are to benefit at all from Bristol 2015 and its legacy.