Supporting Ethnic Minority Businesses at the Local Community Level: A Review of the NLTEC/BLLN Synergy Project

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1.   Introduction

Aims of the Paper

The growing importance of ethnic minority businesses (EMBs) within the UK small business population is well documented in the small business literature (Ward, 1991; London Skills Forecasting Unit, 1999; Bank of England, 1999). Self-employment and rates of business ownership have grown rapidly amongst Britain's migrant communities, particularly since the 1970s, coinciding with a more general growth in the rates of small business formation amongst the wider population during the same period (Storey, 1994). Having said that, the actual number of EMBs can only be estimated because of the absence of large-scale business databases that include ethnicity as a variable. It is nevertheless estimated that the rates of small business formation amongst the migrant communities as a whole have been consistently higher than those of the indigenous community. For example, according to a Barclays Bank (1997) survey, EMBs make up about 7% of the total number of businesses in the UK (compared with about 5% of the population). In the same year, EMBs were also estimated to account for about 9% of new business start-ups in the UK, which indicates that their share is growing, and various estimates suggest that this will continue to be the case in the short to medium term (LDP, 1999; LSFU, 1999). It is however worth noting that behind the overall figures, there appears to be considerable variation between specific ethnic minority groups in terms of their orientation towards self-employment and business ownership. For instance, the relatively high levels of self-employment amongst the Chinese and South Asian groups is usually positively contrasted with that of the African-Caribbean groups, with the indigenous community reported to be somewhere in-between (Curran and Blackburn, 1993; Ram and Jones, 1998, LSFU, 1999).

At the same time, regular reference is made in the ethnic business literature to significant gaps between the documented support needs of EMB owners and the forms of support that they actually use. One of the main tangential areas in terms of business support where research attention has been increasingly focused in recent years concerns the *delivery* of business support to Britain's immigrant communities. There seems to be a consensus amongst observers for instance that the problem may be less to do with the availability of support initiatives per se and more to do with their appropriateness for the various immigrant communities either in terms of targeting (Marlow, 1992), design (Oc and Tiesdall, 1999) or the actual delivery mechanisms (GLE, 2000). Some of the supporting explanations have considered a number of issues including the diversity of the ethnic minority community, and the interplay between this and the operating environment which EMB owners find themselves in (Barrett et al, 1996; Smallbone et al, 1999).

With this as a background, the present paper describes a project concerned with the delivery of business support to the ethnic minority community in North London. Known as *synergy*, the project was established by the North London Training and

Enterprise Council (NLTEC) and Business Link London North (BLLN) and implemented by this paper's third-named author.

2. A brief overview of some characteristics and issues facing ethnic minority-owned businesses in the UK

Traditionally, one of the most reported findings on the characteristics of EMBs is their tendency to concentrate in particular sectors of the economy (Brooks, 1983; Werbner, 1990; Ward, 1991; Curran and Blackburn, 1993), although more recently the breakout into "non traditional" sectors and markets has also been reported in the literature (Focus Central London, 1999). In terms of size as well, most EMBs fall within the small and micro firm category. On this basis, there is an expectation that they will share many of the broader characteristics of the general small business population (Smallbone et al, 1999; SBRC, 1999).

In terms of strategies to mobilise resources, one of the most commonly reported problems faced at start-up by entrepreneurs across all the ethnic groups is the raising of start-up capital (Bank of England, 1997; 1999). In this regard, the relatively low tendency of ethnic minority entrepreneurs to use external start-up funds for their business ventures has often been noted in the literature (Ward, 1987; Basu, 1998), although it has been suggested that the form this takes in practice may vary between ethnic groups (Smallbone et al, op cit.). Recent research examining this issue also suggests that there may be more significant differences within the ethnic minority community than between the EMB community and indigenous white-owned businesses (Ram et al, 2001).

Relatively widespread use of family labour has often been identified as one source of competitive advantage of EMBs, enabling them to cut costs far greater than equivalent white-owned firms whilst also easing the problem of exercising managerial control (Ram, 1994). Although doubts have been raised in the literature as to the continued reliance on this source of labour for future generations of ethnic minority firms (Curran and Blackburn, 1993), the evidence suggests that it is still a key resource (Song, 1997).

EMB research consistently highlights the low propensity of EMBs to use mainstream business support agencies (Marlow, 1992; Focus Central London, 1999; Fadahunsi et al, 2000). As noted earlier, it has been suggested that one reason for such low take-up rates is that support provision is not often tailored to the needs of EMBs, a situation demonstrable for instance by the rarity of consultants from the same ethnic background as the business owner (Marlow, op. cit.). Although the issue of low take-up of services such as those of business consultants appears to be common to the general small business population (Lightfoot, 1996), it is reportedly lower among EMBs (Curran and Blackburn, 1993).

3.   Some issues from previous policy experience

One of the key ongoing debates in the UK concerns the extent to which the support needs of EMBs are distinctive from those of the wider SME population. This is important because, as noted by Ram and Smallbone (2000), it influences the extent to which there is a case for differentiating the types of support offered to EMBs compared with other businesses.

Following the Brixton riots in 1981, the report of the subsequent inquiry (Scarman, 1981) emphasised the need for greater African-Caribbean participation in business as part of a wider recommendation for enterprise as a way for people to "earn" their way out of poverty. The report was instrumental, at a national level, to the establishment of the Ethnic Minority Business Initiative (EMBI) of the Home Office in 1985. Within London, it was also instrumental in determining the agenda for a number of agencies between 1982 and 1984 (specifically the Greater London Enterprise Board, the Greater London Training Board, and the London Co-operative Enterprise Board) which were not specifically set up for such purpose, but through which support to EMBs was channelled for much of the 1980s (see further, Memon, 1988).

More recently, Ram (1998) examined the issue of business support and ethnic minority firms in a national study that focused on four British cities where EMB activity was known to be significant, namely Birmingham, Liverpool, London and Manchester. The results of the study highlighted the following five significant constraints upon the delivery of effective enterprise support.

- ❑ A lack of basic data on the make-up of local ethnic minority firms.
- ❑ A lack of clarity in the rationale for interventions was apparent: specifically in terms of whether interventions were put in place in order to promote competitive advantage, economic development or equality of opportunity
- ❑ The funding regimes of support agencies generated what was seen as unhealthy competition, and militated against effective networking.
- ❑ The 'effectiveness' of support delivery was often equated with meeting contractual requirements rather than business needs.
- ❑ Many officers specialising in support for EMBs perceived themselves as marginal in comparison with better-resourced 'mainstream' providers.

The establishment of discrete units to support ethnic minority firms by some local authorities, TECs and Chambers of Commerce, has been a response to the low propensity of EMBs to access mainstream support provision. This can also be illustrated with reference to a recent study in North London (Fadahunsi et al, 2000), which found that only about one in twenty of more than 80 businesses that were interviewed had used advice or support from any of the mainstream agencies. Significantly, the analysis suggested that this was not because of a lack of awareness of the existence of mainstream business support; rather, it was due to a lack of understanding of the types of support available, doubts about the relevance of what was offered, confusion about which providers can best meet a firm's needs, a lack of confidence and trust in those delivering support and a low level of willingness and ability to pay. It was more common, especially in the early

stages of the business, for business advice and support to have been sought from the business owners' own social network, which frequently included co-ethnic membership business associations as well as non-business clubs or societies. Another London-based study emphasised business owners' concerns about their perception of the fragmentation of the support infrastructure, general concerns with the quality of information available, and other issues mainly to do with the appropriateness of the forms of communication between mainstream business support providers and their clients (GLE/CEEDR, 2000).

A further form of support for ethnic minority businesses is incorporated in broader government policies aimed at urban regeneration. The implicit assumption seems to have been that since ethnic minorities are concentrated within inner-city areas, inner city policy will be of more or less automatic benefit (Oc and Tiesdall. 1999). However, reviews of such programmes have typically concluded that there is scope for a more robust requirement for an ethnic dimension in local regeneration strategies. With regard to business support, there is need for greater awareness, sensitivity and credibility in the delivery of services to ethnic minority enterprises (Ram and Smallbone, 2000; Oc and Tiesdall, 1999).

Since the 1990s in particular, there has also been a discernible rise in the development of co-ethnic business organisations. A number of major British towns and cities contain such bodies, in particular 'Asian', 'Black' or 'Afro/African-Caribbean' business associations. Although the concrete operation of these groups has not been widely documented, some research suggests that the more proactive ones have the potential to effectively complement the existing support delivery process (CEEDR, 2000; Fadahunsi et al, op cit.).

Despite this array of initiatives, research points to a high level of alienation and dissatisfaction with respect to the business support system, more so by particular segments of the EMB community, such as the African-Caribbean community in particular, which is reflected in low penetration levels by mainstream support agencies (see further, CEEDR, op cit.). One implication of this is that there is a significant communication gap between business policy makers and practitioners on the one hand and the ethnic minority communities on the other. Another is the importance of local-level business support infrastructure that is designed to have an impact at the local community level. Apart from these, the preceding subsection also raises a number of policy issues regarding EMB support, some of which can be briefly summarised here:

❑ The business support environment is often hampered, not so much by a lack of initiatives *per se,* but by relatively poor flow of information to individual businesses on a number of issues including finance, development and networking opportunities.

❑ Effective business support delivery is often hampered by a lack of co-ordination, combined with a tendency for support to be delivered by personnel who lack the degree of cultural understanding required to a build trust-based relationship with EMB clients.

□ The fragmentation of business support agencies and initiatives merely serves to confuse rather than assist their intended beneficiaries.

These put a premium on delivery strategy, especially the need for policy to ensure that the business support reaches those who desire it in appreciable form. A number of business support initiatives emanating from the mainstream have sought to take these lessons on board in terms of their design and delivery. The rest of the present paper describes one such attempt to implement a business support initiative - the pilot *synergy* project of the North London TEC / Business Link London North (NLTEC/BLLN).

4.   The Synergy Project

4.1   Establishment

The Synergy project had its conceptual origins in the agency's acknowledgement that there were gaps in its services and activities as a major local economic agency, with the result that not all communities were reached or sufficiently involved in its activities or services. The need was subsequently identified by the NLTEC/BLLN board for a new operational framework for the brokerage and delivery of economic development services across the NLTEC area, that is, the London Boroughs of Barnet, Enfield and Haringey. Specifically, the board recognised the need for a delivery mechanism that was not only professionally appropriate, but would additionally be seen as representative of the communities that were the key beneficiaries of the programme of services under consideration - in this case, the ethnic minority community. The synergy project formally commenced in March 1999 when the NLTEC/BLLN appointed a project co-ordinator.

Earlier in February 1999, the NLTEC/BLLN had been similarly instrumental in the establishment of a public-private and not-for-profit partnership organisation with which the Synergy project would form a close working relationship – the North London Cultural Diversity Forum (NLCDF). The forum itself was one of the outcomes of the North London Regional Dynamism conference held in June 1998, and the Synergy project went on to become one of its key implementation tools. The stated aims of the NLCDF were for its membership to practice and promote equal opportunities in three key functional areas:

- ❑   the recruitment and promotion of employees,
- ❑   the treatment of customers and clients, and
- ❑   the purchase and subcontracting of products and services.

The NLCDF membership included some of the largest employers in North London, majority of which were public sector organisations, although its initial membership also included a number of organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors, as shown in table 1, below:

Table 1: Founding members of the NLCDF

Public Sector	Private Sector	Voluntary Sector
North London Training & Enterprise Council/ Business Link London North London Borough of Barnet London Borough of Enfield London Borough of Haringey Middlesex University College of North East London Enfield College Metropolitan Police Service Barnet, Enfield and Tottenham Police Stations North Middlesex Hospital Trust Employment Service	Prospect Careers Services North London Chamber of Commerce Newsquest (London) Ltd.	Finsbury Park Community Trust Barnet Racial Equality Council Enfield Racial Equality Council Haringey Racial Equality Council North London Voluntary Sector Forum

4.2   Objectives and Activities

Upon its inception, the Synergy project saw its role in terms of facilitating dialogue designed to bring local communities and support providers closer. It acknowledged the problems posed by the fragmentation of communication channels in a diverse ethnic community and recognised that while the needs of the various target audiences were largely similar, the means of communicating with each must be relevant to each in order for future initiatives to make an impact (Page 1999, p2).

An early decision was taken to redraw the programme objectives such that synergy effectively then aimed both to facilitate better community access to NLTEC/BLLN's programmes, and also to facilitate the NLCDF's engagement with the local community. In order to achieve these, it was felt within the project team that at the broadest level, the solution lay in the creation of more opportunities for joining up local socio-economic activities and services that could in turn encourage the creation of more local sectoral and inter-organisational partnerships. In essence, synergy would primarily be a communications tool to facilitate the integration of the ethnic minority community in the North London area into the mainstream in terms of issues primarily relating to business development, social enterprise and various aspects of local community development (Page, op cit., p2). Consequently, although not specifically designed as an EMB support instrument, the project clearly set out its intent to actively reach out to the ethnic minority community for support and inclusion in its realm of activities. More specifically, two target groups were identified as potentially key beneficiaries under the synergy project:

1. NLTEC/BLLN personnel as well as the staff of other designated business support providers, particularly those that tended to be involved in outreach and community development policy development.

2. Persons and organisations in receipt of business support and training.

Synergy took the additional step of involving members of the NLCDF in its activities, and because the NLCDF, being made up of relatively larger employers, was also committed to supporting smaller organisations in establishing their own practices in line with practical guidelines, it gave Synergy the opportunity to market its activities right across the spectrum. It sought to achieve this through a programme of concerted seminars, workshops and conferences that were variously concerned with broad "equal opportunity"-related issues, such as racism, training, ethnic minority businesses, and so forth, although it always had the dissemination of business support information as a secondary aim.

There were three interrelated programmes, namely:

4.2.1   Programme 1: Diversity in Construction

The emphasis under this programme was to highlight the obstacles, which had been known to contribute to the inability of local people and businesses to fully participate in building and development contracts. There were a number of activities designed both to contribute to the involvement of EMBs in the construction industry, and to highlight key issues facing established and potential EMBs in the sector. These included perceptions of racism, lack of positive industry role models, community and familial pressures, as well as perceived difficulties with competition and growing the business within the sector. Activities under this programme centered on public hands-on demonstrations, seminars and work-based training programmes, report launches and information sessions, award shows, and the development of a North London Construction Network. A number of these were organised in conjunction with the Society of Black Architects, and have included the information meeting and seminar on the report of the Construction Industry Training Board report into the 'Under-representation of Black and Asian People in the Construction Industry' (CITB, 1999 [13 July 1999]) and the 'Construction in the Community: Building the Future' event (8 October 1999).

4.2.2   Programme 2: Business and Economic Development

The objective of this programme was to ensure that EMBs were part of the (mainstream) Business Link support infrastructure. Many of the activities under this programme were designed to build capacity not just in the ethnic minority communities but also in intermediary business support providers in terms of their abilities to meet the demand of the community and voluntary sectors in North London. For instance, one facet of this included a series of meetings between the Synergy team and the North London PBA hierarchy that designed to assist in improving the overall cultural understanding within the PBA hierarchy. A number of supplier diversity activities, mentoring initiatives, networking seminars, workshops, conferences and on-site visits were also organised under this programme, many with PBAs and other NLTEC/BLLN personnel in attendance, and further links were forged with higher institutions and other specific agencies such as British Bankers Association and the North London Chamber of Commerce in order to promote the integration of good practice from both academic and practitioner communities. Specific activities included the information meeting and seminar on the Bank of England report into the Financing of Ethnic Minority Firms in the UK (Bank of England, 1999 [15 June 1999]), the Enterprise in Cultural Diversity Conference (29 March 2000).

4.2.3 Programme 3: Social Inclusion and Enterprise

Activities under this programme were mainly directed at local community businesses and social enterprises. The activities were designed to employ existing training, enterprise and employment opportunities within local neighbourhoods (such as New Deal, Open learning partnerships etc) to achieve various socio-cultural, as well as health and environmental interests and occupation goals. A particular focus was on initiatives designed to enable enterprises in the creative and cultural sectors to link up with commerce and industry.

Other events included workshops that focused on identifying issues and challenges facing women and children, workshops that focused on identifying the training and education needs of young ethnic minority persons and other events with a focus on developing and maintaining a creative industries network. Examples of these activities include the NLTEC Aspirations for the Creative Industries Showcase (24 October 1999) and the Developing a Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Strategy seminar (June 2000).

4.3   Synergy Successes and Limitations

The Synergy project achieved a measure of success on a number of fronts.

- ❑ Its £50,000 funding was the basis for levering in more than £200,000 of additional funds in cash and kind.
- ❑ From its initial conception as a three-month pilot project, it eventually ran for two years. Its duration could be said to demonstrate the need for such an approach to business support at the local level. More importantly, the way of working piloted by Synergy has influenced or been adopted by various business support providers across North London.
- ❑ A total of 4,500 persons attended Synergy events during the lifetime of the project. Majority of participants were from the ethnic minority community.

Synergy has also often been cited by academics and practitioners alike as an example of a policy initiative with elements of good practice in it (see for example, NEF 2001; CEEDR, 2001; GLE 2000).

- ❑ For instance, Synergy was a bi-monthly agenda item during NLTEC board meetings. The Chief Executive of the TEC actively and visibly supported the Synergy project, and its delivery was by people with cultural "understanding" of the needs of the target group. This however did not necessarily mean they had to come from particular ethnic minority communities. The involvement of the TEC management in many of the events ensured that they had credibility throughout the NLTEC organisation and that there were sound arrangements in place for monitoring the events and obtaining useful feedback from them, especially on the question of whether the project as a whole was adding value.

- ❑ Furthermore, through its programme of events to link business research, policy planners and the business community, the synergy project is thought to have been particularly effective as a conduit that facilitated networking amongst different EMBs, and between EMBs, mainstream businesses and

support agencies. Its specific links with NLTEC/BLLN personnel directly resulted in increased dialogue between the personnel and business support providers from smaller organisations, which often resulted in the development of new business training/support contracts or the extension of existing ones. It also resulted in increased visibility of PBAs within the community as they increasingly participated in the various events arranged under the synergy umbrella. By the same token, its strong links with the local higher educational institutions have allowed for greater levels of mutually beneficial cross evaluation and refinement of techniques and methodologies.

The project's apparent success appears to have been based on the fact that synergy operated within a support framework that placed a premium on making good use of existing resources rather than creating a new hierarchy or layer of business support; and secondly, its activities were designed for access by the whole community of support providers and consumers, enabling business support agencies to have rapid and direct feedback which in turn enabled them to focus more effectively on specific areas identified for assistance. However, even though the project benefited from the direct support of the Chief Executive of the NLTEC/BLLN, it also needed to be embedded at the heart of the NLTEC/BLLN administration. Instead, management of the project was ceded to the NLCDF, whose voluntary nature tended to limit the ability of the project to have a greater impact on the wider community. In some ways, its impact within the NLTEC/BLLN system may be considered limited. For instance, some of its more ambitious recommendations, such as the establishment of a Centre for Expertise in Programme Delivery/Implementation (CEPD), or indeed the establishment of a North London Community Business Board (NLCBB) to be created out of the existing Community Business Enfield (CBEN) and Haringey Regeneration Agency (HRA) with support from the NLTEC/BLLN eventually did not see the light of day.

Concluding remarks: The Need For Engagement

The synergy project has been a catalyst for making connections work between public, private and not-for-profit partnerships and has demonstrated is its viability as a transferable working model that can be usefully employed by mainstream support providers where an effective communications strategy is considered beneficial as an implementation tool. For example, it's flexibility as a "way of working" model is demonstrated in the three projects currently being worked on by the Synergy team using approaches originally developed for the synergy project:

The **Protocol Framework** devised by Statecraft Consulting is an interlocking network of African, Caribbean and black British professionals, intermediaries and business owners that aims to support and enhance the membership's collective competitiveness by building on their collective management and entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and experience.

RCN Connect is a diversity, equality and cultural understanding in representation and workforce support strategy developed for the Royal College of Nursing (West Midland region) in terms of their outreach work and in the area of communication of policies, procedures and guidelines.

(Barnet) Nexxus Project was commissioned by the Barnet Primary Care Trust, supported by the London Borough of Barnet, and is concerned with the development of a strategy for a joint health and regeneration approach to tackling business support and social exclusion issues in the London borough of Barnet and the North London sub-region. It aims to deliver relevant advice, support and signposting through a series of concerted meetings, workshops, seminars and conferences underpinned by a targeted communication campaign.

In terms of the delivery of business support, one of the key issues that the Synergy approach demonstrated was its viability as a working model that could be usefully employed by mainstream business support providers for effective engagement with the ethnic minority business communities, if policy support is to make a real impact. The message of engagement is a resonant one, particularly for the recently established national Small Business Service (SBS), which has a brief to encourage and support entrepreneurship in all sections of society. Engagement is a necessary condition if this aim to be achieved, to which we may add other key principles:

- A need to build on the acquired knowledge and experience of those business support providers who are skilled at working with EMBs.
- A need for an outreach strategy to engage EMBs, along with more traditional promotional approaches such as advertising via target media;
- A need for ethnic minority business representation across the structures set up to manage the Small Business Service and such other institutions;
- A need for mechanisms to enable dialogue between EMBs and other stakeholders and policy makers on an on-going basis.
- A need for the SBS to establish procedures and practices to facilitate effective implementation of the engagement strategy. These should include the recruitment and retention of additional ethnic minority advisors; cultural awareness training for all business advisors operating in areas with potential EMB clients; establishing appropriate EMB targets together with effective procedures to monitoring their achievement; taking a wider approach to supply chain development which includes enabling large purchasers to adopt supplier diversity measures.

Clearly however, the ultimate success for synergy or similar projects would be to eliminate the need for such projects by integrating their objectives into the mainstream infrastructure.

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