

THE BLACK SYSTEMIC SAFETY FUND

MASTER LEARNING REPORT

JANUARY
2024

IMPACT ON URBAN HEALTH



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by Dr Tamanda Walker (independent consultant) with support from Sarah Samaha, Ravenna Nuaimy-Barker and Kathry at Reos Partners, however, the contents and learning reflected within it have been arrived at collectively by all those involved in the 'The Black Systemic Safety Fund' process. This report was designed and laid out by Drew Sinclair.

We are especially grateful and indebted to members of the implementing team, who provided invaluable insights, expertise and feedback in the drafting of this report. Special thanks to: Radhika Bynon, Stephanie Woodrow, Kamna Muralidharan, and Rianna Raymond-Williams and Erel Onojobi at Impact on Urban Health; Michael Hamilton, Christina Oredoko, Ali Ahmed, and Aisha Khan at The Ubele Initiative; Yannick Wassmer, Ravenna Nuaimy Barker, Sarah Samaha and Kathryn Gichini at Reos Partners and Dr Tamanda Walker (independent consultant).

Our thanks is also extended to Drew Sinclair, Debi Lewinson-Roberts, Adrian Jones, Dr Celestin Okoroji, and Veronika McKenzie, all of whom made significant contributions to documenting and unearthing learning associated with this project. In addition, we are grateful to the experts who contributed their expertise as part of participant learning journeys: Derek Bardowell, Councillor Mahamed Hashi, Joe Montgomery, Dr Yansie Rolston, David Bryan, and Karl Murray.

Finally, our deepest gratitude and thanks are reserved for the local experts and community leaders who have put their trust in the implementing team and invested valuable time and energy into the social lab and its associated learning processes. Process participants include: Adrian Jones, Angie Herrera, Candice James, Chris Dusu, Duro Oye, Georgia Reynolds, Hillna Fontaine, Ira Campbell, Joel Dunn, Josephine Namusisi-Riley, Juliana Rondon, Katrina Thomas, Margaret Pierre, Sadam Garad, Shani Joseph-Mitchell, Suzann McLean, Winston Goode.



Dr Tamanda Walker

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

Impact on Urban Health

Impact on Urban Health focus on improving health in inner-city areas, which have some of the most extreme health outcomes. Alongside their vibrancy and diversity sit stark health inequalities. Impact on Urban Health, want to change this. They believe that we can remove obstacles to good health, by making urban areas healthier places for everyone to live. IoUH focus on complex health issues that disproportionately impact people living in urban areas. They partner with others to make the biggest impact. And are a part of Guy's & St Thomas' Foundation, working to support health in Lambeth and Southwark.

The Ubele Initiative

The Ubele Initiative, is an African diaspora led, infrastructure plus organisation, empowering Black and racially minoritised and Minoritised communities in the UK, to act as catalysts for social and economic change. To achieve this, they work with community leaders, groups, and organisations in the UK and beyond to strengthen their sustainability, resilience, and voice.

Ubele is taken from Swahili meaning 'the future'.

Reos Partners

Reos Partners, established 2007, is an international social enterprise that helps people move forward together on their most important and intractable issues. Reos leads processes that enable teams of stakeholders—even those who don't understand or agree with or trust one another—to make progress on their toughest challenges. Reos' approach is systemic, collaborative, and creative.



INTRODUCTION

Over a period of 18 months from July 2022 to December 2023, Impact on Urban Health (IoUH) initiated a process that engaged a group of community leaders in a participatory process aimed at addressing the issue of safety for Black and racially minoritised communities within Lambeth and Southwark. IoUH sought to pilot a process for determining its next strategic focus areas by leveraging the expertise of community leaders as a foundational element. They chose to centre “safety” as an overarching theme because while it is a precondition to health, it is also broad enough to allow community leaders to develop their own ideas of what is needed to make Lambeth and Southwark residents safer beyond the narrow lens of crime, justice and policing.

The process – which we refer to in this report as ‘The Black Systemic Safety Fund’ – was designed and facilitated by The Ubele Initiative and Reos Partners using a social lab approach. It consisted of six workshops, with participant-led learning journeys, prototyping sessions, and reflective interviews in between. Core to the initiative has been an emphasis on centring Black and racially minoritised community leaders as experts in thinking about and addressing systemic challenges. This has included paying Black community leaders for their insights, expertise and engagement with the Systemic Safety Fund process, and then placing a further £500K directly into their hands as they worked collectively to develop and resource a range of interconnected prototypes, solutions and initiatives aimed at tackling the systemic barriers to safety within their local communities.

Through a learning partnership, Dr. Tamanda Walker and the team at Reos Partners captured learnings that this process generated about safety, participatory grant-making, and black-led systems change processes. This report reflects on those learnings. It is intended to inform funders and practitioners working in or around all three areas.

The primary audiences of this report are those who were engaged in the process itself: colleagues in Impact on Urban Health, including Programme Directors, the Executive Director and the Executive Investment Committee.

This report serves as the backbone and foundation for supplementary learning materials that will be developed in the communications phase of the initiative. These learning materials will prioritise accessibility through the use of engaging language and visually compelling formats. The follow up learning materials will be directed at external audiences including but not limited to, other funders, and people who share our interest in participatory grantmaking, transformational philanthropy, and shifting power within systems.

Part one of this report describes the process, implementing partners and learning methodology underpinning the ‘The Black Systemic Safety Fund’, while part two delves into the learnings in detail.

DEFINITIONS & CONCEPTS

The concepts used throughout this learning report have mostly been defined according to Sanjiv Lingayah and Nina Kellys "[A Guide to Talking About Racism](#)" (July, 2023).

TERMINOLOGY	DEFINITION
Anti-racism	Anti-racism is the practice of identifying and ending racism by changing the values, structures and behaviours that enable it (Lingayah and Kelly 2023).
Black vs black	Most raçe scholars - especially those focused on anti-black racism - capitalise when referring to Black people of African descent. This is to distinguish people of African descent from other racially minoritised people who identify as politically black (lower case) as part of historical struggles for recognition by the state and systems (Meer 2014: 13).
Coloniality	<p>Coloniality' is a concept first defined by Aníbal Quijano and later developed by Walter Mignolo.</p> <p>Quijano described coloniality as an encompassing political, cultural, epistemological, and symbolic condition (Quijano, 2008). He illustrates coloniality of power as the inter-relationship between modern forms of exploitation and domination, and coloniality of knowledge as the influence of colonialism on domains of knowledge production.</p>
Ethnicity	A related concept to 'race' is ethnicity – used to describe people who share a common history, geography and culture. Ethnicity can be self-selected, whereas 'race' is more usually imposed by others to classify groups in a hierarchy. However, ethnic categories are also socially constructed. And they can be intertwined with or become racial categories, e.g., African-Caribbean, Indian and Muslim, and can also be a basis for racist discrimination (Lingayah and Kelly, 2023).
'Race'	'Race' is a socially constructed concept used to group humans, often based on physical appearance. 'Race' was constructed as a hierarchal system of classification to identify and differentiate some groups, in order to elevate some and marginalise others (Lingayah and Kelly, 2023).

TERMINOLOGY	DEFINITION
<p>Racialisation</p>	<p>A dominant concept used to describe the processes through which people come to be seen as members of particular racial and/or ethnic groups (Delgado and Stefancic 2014:8; Meer 2014:125). Processes of racialisation serve as the mechanisms through which individuals are “socialised into a socio-systemic hierarchy” (Suyemoto et al. 2020), in which positive and/or negative attributes and values (i.e. stereotypes) can be ascribed to particular groups, based on their real or imagined shared characteristics, values and attributes. Dominant groups claim possession of superior qualities, corraling power and privilege in ways that uphold their interests, while asserting the inferiority of Others, who remain subservient, marginalised and oppressed (Rollock and Gillborn, 2011).</p>
<p>Racially Minoritised</p>	<p>The term ‘Minoritised’ points to the active processes of marginalisation involved in racist practice, including the unequal allocation of power, resources and status (Lingayah and Kelly, 2023).</p>
<p>Racially Minoritised</p>	<p>Systemic racism describes the ways that individual (interpersonal), institutional and structural racism jointly produce harms to Black and racially minoritised people relative to white people. These systems are so deeply set that to reset them requires fundamental, transformational change (Lingayah and Kelly, 2023).</p>



Kathryn Gichini

Sarah Samaha

ABOUT THE PROCESS, IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS AND LEARNING METHODOLOGY

PROJECT PROCESS

'The Black Systemic Safety Fund' adopted a social lab methodology – an approach pioneered and made popular by Reos Partners, and articulated in 'The Social Labs Revolution'.¹

A social lab is an experimental process that brings together diverse stakeholders to tackle a complex social issue. In the lab, communities of experts explore the root causes of a selected issue, and jointly design and test prototypes and solutions to a shared challenge – both in the lab itself and beyond.

As prototypes are tested in the real world, new data and insights emerge, and solutions are refined and tested further as part of a continuous cycle of improvement.²

Methodology

// The only way these solutions work is when they're developed in partnership with the people actually affected by these problems. **//**

Zaid Hassan, Author of The Social Labs Revolution

Core to the social lab methodology is an emphasis on creative, participatory, flexible and action-oriented approaches to solving complex issues. As such, social labs are:

- **Social:** They require a team that reflects the diversity of people directly affected by and involved in the problem at hand, and the full multi-layered reality of the system. What does this social aspect accomplish? Among other things, it enables greater creativity and avoids the tendency to impose top-down solutions, which rarely take advantage of the full range of knowledge—including local and informal knowledge—that can be brought to bear on a problem. Detailed knowledge of a system comes from living in it.

1. See also the Social Labs blog: <https://social-labs.org/>

2. As Ilse Marschalek et al (2022) note, this process means social labs function according to a participatory action research methodology, providing a continuous feedback and improvement loop.



- **Experimental:** Complex problems are not amenable to monolithic, planned “solutions.” The social lab methodology supports teams to devise prototypal solutions to key social issues which can then be tried out in a cycle of consultation, experimentation, assessment, and revision. While messy and unpredictable, this process allows a portfolio of promising ideas to be tested and developed before too much time and money is spent on them. When, by trial and error, the teams have discovered what works, they can then grow these solutions with greater confidence.
- **Focus on root causes:** What most of us refer to as “problems” are typically symptoms. When we focus on symptoms, we produce at best a temporary improvement. At worst, we inadvertently reinforce the dynamics that are the cause of the problem. Through the active participation of people from every level of the system, the social lab methodology identifies and acts on root causes — thereby opening the door to real progress. Within the ‘The Black Systemic Safety Fund’, while root causes were addressed, both process participants and the implementing team acknowledged the need to intervene in a complex and ever-changing eco-system of causal factors that work to undermine safety for Black and racially minoritised communities in Lambeth and Southwark.
- **Invite dissent:** Dissent can be uncomfortable, but the social lab methodology embraces it as an antidote to groupthink and inertia. The friction of argument and diverse positions unleashes tremendous energy. When skillfully managed, that energy is creative and productive. In addition, the free expression of competing and contested claims in the structured environment of the lab reduces the likelihood of confrontation outside it.

// The main objective of the social lab is to bring communities of local experts together so that experts can decide the way forward. With each of our social labs we have money for Black communities to prototype the idea that they come up with. **//**

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative

Within the ‘Black Systemic Safety Fund’, the team at The Ubele Initiative and Reos Partners worked together to design a social lab process focussed around the shared challenge of ‘a lack of safety for Black and racially minoritised communities in Lambeth and Southwark’. Critically, this shared challenge was addressed by local community experts who directly experience and work around issues of (a lack of) safety across a range of settings relevant to their work (e.g. within work relevant to mental health support, children and young people, housing, migrant rights, community work etc).

Since the majority of local community experts were themselves Black and racially minoritised, the social lab process differed somewhat from other labs run by Reos Partners, and was adapted to meet the needs of a Black-led systems change initiative. This involved drawing on the personal and professional expertise of the team at The Ubele Initiative, an African diaspora led, infrastructure plus organisation, empowering Black and racially minoritised and Minoritised communities in the UK, to act as catalysts for social and economic change.

“What we've done in this Lab is quite unique and different from other multi stakeholder processes. Often, the idea is that we work with a microcosm of the system in the room. This often means that a few minoritised voices are part of these processes. In reality, this means you often see dominant power structures still showing up in those rooms (i.e. minoritised voices not being heard, leaving the process due to a lack of a sense of belonging). I think what we've really done differently here is that we actually moved marginalised voices from margin to centre by working with a predominantly Black and Brown group of people. One of the underlying hypotheses, for me, that we're testing is something along the lines of: people who are oppressed by a system often know best how they actually work, therefore we need to centre those voices in our efforts to achieve real, systemic change.”

Yannick Wassmer, Senior Consultant, Reos Partners

Guiding Theory

As part of the social lab approach, and inspired by Reos Partner's change-facilitation philosophy, the implementing partners – especially Michael Hamilton (The Ubele Initiative) and Yannick Wassmer (Reos Partners), as lead facilitators of the process – adopted a series of participatory methods and facilitation approaches. These approaches centred the use of music, art, play and creativity as a means of moving through 'stuck problems' within the learning and prototyping process (see section three of this report for more details). Within residential workshops, this involved working alongside Drew Sinclair, a multidisciplinary artist and creator with a specialism in community work.

“Through music, art, play, and creativity we 'brought Africa into the room' for lack of better wording. I feel that this was of great importance in shaping the identity of the group, how relationships were formed... It brought an element of joy, pride, and connection that I haven't seen in many other processes that I've been part of.”

Yannick Wassmer, Senior Consultant, Reos Partners

3. Adam Kahane (2021), *Facilitating Breakthrough: How to Remove Obstacles, Bridge Differences, and Move Forward Together*.

Available at: <https://reospartners.com/resource-library/facilitating-breakthrough-book>



Together these participatory methods and facilitation approaches were guided by Theory U – also referred to in this report as the U-theory, U-process or U-methodology respectively. Pioneered by Otto Scharmer, Theory U is an action-research and awareness-based method for changing systems and addressing complex social issues.⁴

“Instead of the normal, straightforward way of dealing with complex issues, the U methodology allowed in-depth analysis of complex issues, and provided a holding space for participants to think deeply, reflect and develop solutions to safety issues.”

Local Expert & Participant

According to Michael Hamilton, a Director of The Ubele Initiative and one of the lead facilitators of the process alongside Yannick Wassmer at Reos Partners, the U-theory was applied to ‘The Black Systemic Safety Fund’ using a three-phased approach which involved systematically addressing and responding to:

- **The Internal Conditions of the Intervenor:** Rather than jumping immediately into problem-solving mode, “the U-process begins with the idea that the best predictor for the outcome of an intervention is the internal condition of the intervenor”. This means before any discussion or action can take place, the intervenor(s) in a system – in this case, the group of participants in the Black safety process – must become more aware of themselves. In the first phase of the work, group members focus on building awareness of their strengths, limitations, areas in which they feel stuck, and what motivates them to become unstuck and move forward. Taking this approach is very much in line with principles and approaches pioneered by systems change activists and facilitators including Bill O’ Brien, Grace Lee Boggs and Adrienne Maree Brown, for example.

“The quality of the intervention depends on the interior state of the intervenor.”

Bill O Brien

“Transform yourself to transform the world.”

Grace Lee Boggs



4. Otto Scharmer (2018) The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications. Available at: <https://www.u-school.org/theory-u>

“Transform yourself to transform the world’... doesn’t mean to get lost in the self, but rather to see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practise justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet. //”

Adrienne Marie Brown

- **A Shared Concern with Safety:** Having built individual and collective awareness, the second step of the U-process emphasises becoming subject driven – identifying and collectively working to understand ‘a lack of safety’ as the shared social problem or issue, which is complex in nature, and therefore required the development of prototypes for action.

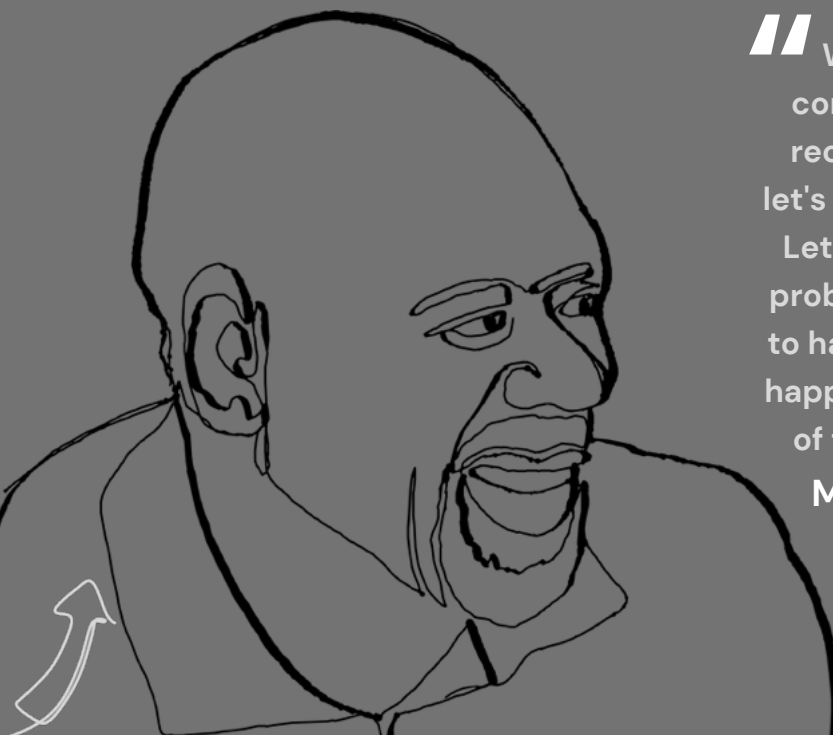
“In this piece of work, the subject was safety. But we wanted to think about safety beyond the narrow lens of violent crime and policing, which is what tends to happen when it comes to Black communities. So the discussion in the second phase of the process was: What do we know about safety? Can we very intentionally engage in learning journeys with experts who can share different perspectives on safety? Can we consider more rigorously how other people think about and approach problems associated with safety? Who else is working on or affected by this issue that we should be talking to, and who should be informing the development of our own solutions and prototypes? //”

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative

- **Actions to be Taken:** Finally, in the third step of the U-process, participants (i.e. community experts), move into taking action to address their shared challenge using the prototypes developed in earlier phases. In this phase, community experts intentionally try not to overthink the problem or their actions, focussing first on implementing solutions, and refining their approach as they move forward and new insights emerge.

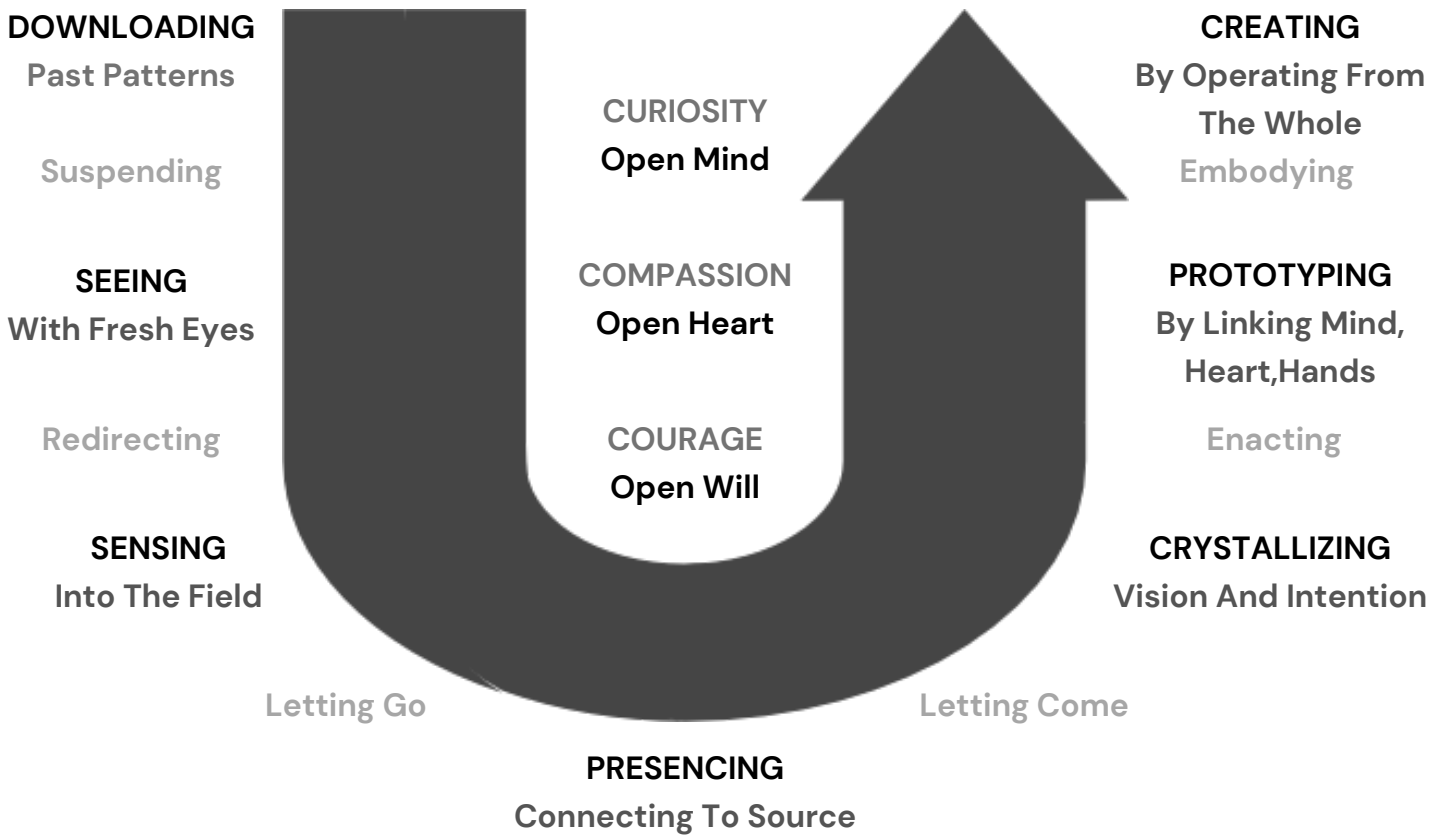
“We try not to spend too much time considering what we’re going to do. But recognise, we’ve done the work. And so let’s trust our instincts, let’s trust our belly. Let’s trust that we are the expert on this problem. And the thing that we feel needs to happen is a thing that actually needs to happen because we have lived experience of the problem we’re trying to address. //”

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative



Michael Hamilton

THEORY U: OUR UNDERLYING FRAME



While the U-theory adopted in the process can be described quite simply – and appears neat and straightforward when depicted as a diagram or shared retrospectively in a report – the reality of applying this approach was markedly different in practice. This is a point addressed in more detail in our learnings around the process (see section three of this report), which reflects the messy, iterative and non-linear nature of the social lab and sheds light on how Michael and Yannick, as lead facilitators of the process, were required to hold the U methodology lightly – flexibly and intuitively drawing upon a range of participatory activities and moving back and forth like a pendulum between the various phases of the ‘U’ as they pursued emerging lines of inquiry and responded to new insights and questions thrown up by the group.

“ Reflecting back on how we used theory-U now, it comes across like a really neat process. But in reality, it really wasn't. The safety project, for me, was a real demonstration of the iterative nature of the U process. It was **really messy**. We moved through it in cycles, getting lost along the road, having to revisit certain places to reconsider our sense of direction. ...There was just a constant sense of developing ideas and testing those ideas, and then coming back to the drawing board together. ...But I think that's how it's supposed to be. **”**

Yannick Wassmer, Senior Consultant, Reos Partners



“What we ended up with as facilitators was an experimental approach in which we were constantly saying, what's going to work in this particular space, and with this particular group now? ...A space where we could take risks and give something new a try. Where if it works, it works. And if it doesn't work, we declared it in the group quite openly. ...We had to open people up to possibility; to take people away from certainty so they could explore new mental models and ways of being. ...Even as we've got to the prototyping stage, it's not been about saying, 'This is this is the thing that's gonna work'. It's about saying, let's give this a go! ”

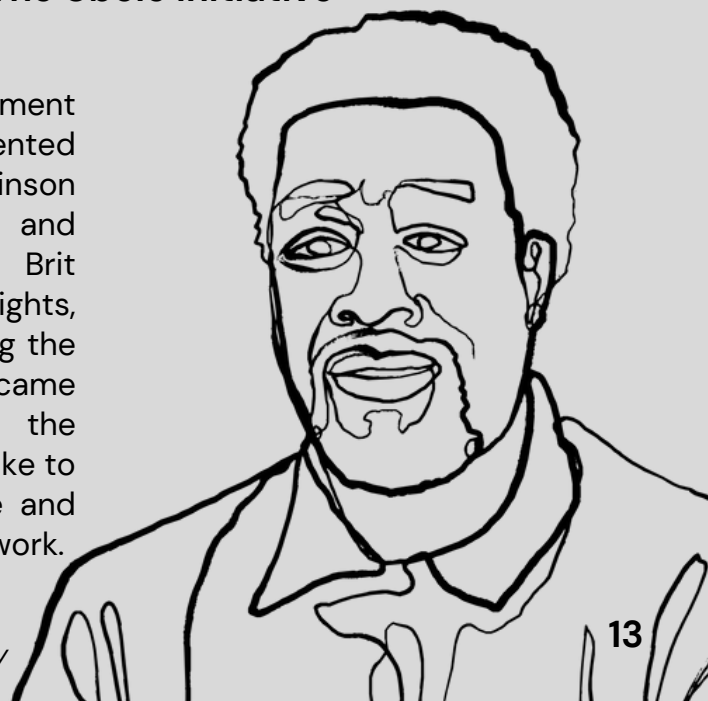
Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative

Critically, the open-ended and messy nature of the process also had to be factored into the design of the process, and the approach to learning. This was where the role of the project manager, Christina Oredoko at The Ubele Initiative, became especially important in holding together, facilitating and creating the container for relationships across the implementing team and local experts. While this relational role is one that might be expected of any project manager, within the context of the social lab, the additional emphasis on acting as a host, convenor and even mediator became especially apparent during moments of uncertainty or challenge as the process unfolded. As such it required balancing pragmatic and logistical considerations of project management – the desire to create order out of complexity or chaos – with the need to remain open to new directions.

“The role of the project manager is hugely important. Within the social lab and U theory, we call the project manager the host or convenor; the person that's holding people beyond the workshops and creating a container to deal with the kinds of issues that emerge in a process like this. ...It's absolutely critical that the project manager and convenor understands the process, and sees their role as relational. Their job is to hold people through the process of experimentation, and resist getting scared about outcomes along with funders or process participants; resist the desire to take the groups into action prematurely, which is the urge many of us have. ”

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative

Adding further support to the need to document and track the open-ended and process-oriented nature of the project, was the work of Debi Lewinson Roberts (independent consultant, storyteller and facilitator) and Veronika McKenzie (Reel Brit Productions), both of whom captured insights, learning and data related to the social lab along the way. Documenting the journey in itself became critical, since it allowed members of the implementing team and process participants alike to be 'on the same page' about progress made and learning surfaced across various phases of the work.



Karl Murray

Process

Workshop Dates:

- Jul 7th (kick off workshop)
- Nov 21&22
- Jan 18,19,20
- Mar 9,10
- Apr 17,18 Learning Journeys
- May 15,16
- Jun 12,13
- Nov 27,28

ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION
Workshops	Over a period of 18 months from July 2022 to December 2023 six in-person participatory workshops were run with a group of community leaders from Lambeth and Southwark. These included a series of prototyping sessions in which participants developed innovative models to address Black safety issues in Lambeth and Southwark.
Learning Journeys	A series of five participant-led learning journey sessions with invited experts.

The hefty commitment and time invested in the process, thirteen days of workshops, is reflected in the depth of the relationships, insights, and commitments that were forged.

Learning Methodology

Learning from the safety project was led by Ravenna Nuaimy Barker and Sarah Samaha at Reos Partners, an organisation working globally to steward systems change initiatives, and Dr Tamanda Walker, an independent consultant and researcher specialising in race, decolonial theory and Black-led systems change efforts.

Sources of Learning

Key insights presented in this report were derived from:

ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION
Four In-Person workshops	A series of four in-person participatory workshops run with a group of community leaders from Lambeth and Southwark in March, May, June and November 2023. These workshops were facilitated by Michael Hamilton (The Ubele Initiative) and Yannick Wassmer (Reos Partners) and systematically documented by Debi Lewinson Roberts (independent consultant).

ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION
Five Learning Journeys	A series of five participant-led learning journey sessions with invited experts, including David Bryan, Derek Bardowell, Dr Mahamed Hash, Dr Yansie Rolston and Dr Ariel Breau Torres, and Dr Joe Montgomery.
Prototyping Sessions	A series of prototyping sessions within and beyond facilitated residencies in which participants developed innovative models to address Black safety issues in Lambeth and Southwark.
15 one-on-one interviews	A total of 15 one-on-one interviews that include the perspectives of 13 project participants.
Reflection Sessions	A total of two shared reflections on learning from the project with participants – one at the final in-person workshop in November 2023, and a second following an initial draft and write up of the project learning in March 2024. Both sessions were facilitated by Dr Tamanda Walker.
Video transcripts on participant reflections	Transcripts from participant reflections on the process documented in videos on the project and its associated methodologies and processes by Veronica McKenzie of Reel Brit Productions .
Surveys and evaluation	Participant surveys and evaluations undertaken in the middle and at the end of the process.
Periodic reflections from the organising and implementing team	Reflections on the process by members of the Organising, Facilitation and Learning Partnership Teams at Impact on Urban Health, the Ubele Initiative and Reos Partners over the duration of the process.

Analysis Approach

Together, the learning partnership team took an ethnographic approach to learning work. This involved participating in and observing group processes and workshops, gathering a range of additional data, and reflecting collectively on emerging insights throughout the project.

These insights were used to inform, refine, and make improvements to the work of the implementing partners – Impact on Urban Health, the Ubele Initiative and Reos Partners – over the duration of the process.

Dr Celestin Okoroji,



In later stages of the project, the learning partnership team undertook a more in depth analysis of interview data and other project materials (e.g. workshop notes, prototyping data, and video transcripts), to understand participant perceptions of the process. This analysis took place over three key phases:

Phase 1:

Initial and in-depth analysis of interview transcripts to identify core and sub-themes and learning

Phase 2:

Critical reflection on core and sub-themes to explore issues of power and coloniality – e.g. identifying silences, the unsaid, and other elephants or sticky issues to be surfaced

Phase 3:

Sharing and facilitating a discussion of all learning and analysis with participants at the project's final workshop in order to sense-check and identify points of resonance and dissonance amongst participants

It bears mentioning that interviews, which were the largest source of data for this report, were conducted with just 15 (i.e. 60%) of the project's 25 participants and implementing team members, and undertaken in later stages of the project (although several of these were interviewed on more than one occasion). Apart from one interviewee, the majority that shared their perspectives at interview were involved from the beginning to the end of the process, and were generally more engaged in participant-led initiatives such as learning journeys and prototyping activities.

As such, the insights shared through interviews skew towards especially enthusiastic and committed participants. Less represented are the views of those who were unable or unwilling, for a range of reasons, to remain involved and engaged with the process. Among those interviewed, and those we have been able to follow up with since the end of the process, only one has shared more critical perspectives on the process overall – perspectives which are integrated in the remainder of the report. Other participants broadly shared how impactful and personally transformative the process had been, citing time pressures, personal commitments and health challenges as reasons they had been forced to disengage from the process; or caveating any more critical reflections with reflections on the overall positive impacts of their involvement in the social lab.

Critical Reflection on the Learning Process

The learning process itself has generated some important insights which we hope will inform future initiatives. Most significant for a project focussed on safety within minoritised communities of Lambeth and Southwark was the challenge of convening and identifying the right learning partnership team from the outset of the project.



Together, Impact on Urban Health, The Ubele Initiative and Reos Partners, were intentional and committed in their desire to engage a values-aligned Black learning partner to engage with the work. The intention was to onboard at least one evaluating partner that could bring an independent, critical lens to learning – one that was informed, to some extent, by lived experience, and could ensure the safety of participants engaged in the process insofar as possible.

A key challenge – and one that is rooted in structural issues – was the difficulty of identifying a suitable learning partner with both the capacity and skills to undertake this role as part of an evolving and emerging pilot process. This meant that the final learning partnership team was convened later than would be ideal in future, and that there was some flux, change and inconsistency amongst the core team during the middle of the process – a situation that likely caused some anxiety and stress to implementing partners. Similarly, it meant that some participants were interviewed on more than one occasion and there was duplication in some data collection, and less of a focus on other aspects of learning – for example, learning surrounding the prototyping phase of the social lab process, which might otherwise have been picked up (see section one of this report for further details). While participants were remunerated for their involvement and did not seem to be fatigued by this, it is worth bearing in mind for future.

Action/Recommendation: Implementing partners to continue their work to diversify their team of evaluation and learning partners for local projects and, where possible, to ensure engaged partners have a clear project plan and timeline to commit to from the outset.

1) LEARNINGS

About Safety

1. CONTEXT

In initiating the process, Impact on Urban Health wanted to learn about how they might involve the local community in determining priority issues to be addressed under future programmes.

Prior to the social lab, the programmes and priorities of Impact on Urban Health – childrens food and health, childrens mental health, multiple long-term conditions, the health effects of air pollution – had been selected through a desk-based research exercise undertaken by Deloitte 7–8 years ago. Recognising the weaknesses in this approach, the organisation wanted to explore a way of selecting future programmes in partnership with local communities, so that people who live in and work closely with the challenges experienced in Lambeth and Southwark might have a strong influence in selecting the priority issues the organisation should focus its resources on.



Safety had repeatedly emerged as a key concern for local communities through community research and through conversations with community organisations. It was an issue Impact Urban Health had not explored, and was understood by staff in the organisation to represent a large, open theme with sufficient scope for local leaders to fruitfully explore, dig into and apply across a range of sectors.

As a starting point, IOUH commissioned a literature review to gather key themes in relation to safety and work undertaken to address these issues and increase safety for Black communities and to connect it to the wider social determinants of health.

As a starting point, IOUH commissioned a literature review, which explored safety as a critical priority and indicator of the health and wellbeing, and as a pre-condition for humans and communities to thrive across a range of settings. This literature review identified work already undertaken to address safety issues for Black communities, and connected this work to wider thinking on the social determinants of health.

One outcome of this process was a report which presented a holistic overview of safety as an issue that is rarely addressed explicitly by organisations, governments, and in the literature. This report advanced a framework for safety and identified seven key safety principles – resilience, healthy and calm body, belonging, affection, validation, sovereignty and predictability – which reflected psychological, emotional and spiritual safety as preconditions for health, alongside bodily safety. This way of thinking about safety was offered to local experts and participants as a starting point at the outset of the process, but with a clear encouragement to challenge, build on, or outright reject its contents in relation, as they saw fit (Kubbutat-Byrne, Ardaiz & Adekunle Rufai 2022: 4).⁵

What we wanted to learn...

Within the social lab, implementing partners wanted to learn more about safety as it affects Black and racially minoritised communities, young people and women in Lambeth and Southwark. However the desire to understand safety had to be addressed more holistically, and ideally disrupt the tendency to engage with Black and racially minoritised communities through the lens of ‘knife crime’, stop and search, and policing, which have tended to be a dominant focus among funders and policy makers seeking to address issues in the local community. As a result, learning revolved around unearthing the underlying conditions for safety, exploring:

- What does safety mean for Black and racially minoritised communities, young people and women: a) in these boroughs and b) in urban areas more generally?
- How does feeling safe or unsafe impact their health and their lives?

We particularly wanted to think about the types of approaches local leaders and community experts might want to take, and gain insights about the system actors and structures they want to focus on. Key questions guiding this phase of work included:

- What are the conditions needed for people, particularly racialised minorities, women and young people to feel safe in urban areas?

5. See Kubbutat-Byrne, Ardaiz & Adekunle Rufai (2022), ‘Safety’.



- What types of approaches do local experts suggest to enhance the conditions that support safety? What do we do about making the Black community feel safer?
- What actors and structures have they identified as key to focus on in the system?
- How do we allow ideas of that safety to emanate from ourselves? How might local experts fund the conditions that foster greater safety in the community?

Why it was important to learn about this...

Learning about safety in the context of Black and racially minoritised communities is crucial for several reasons:

1. Historical and systemic factors: Safety concerns in Black and racially minoritised communities are rooted in a complex history of systemic racism, economic inequality, and social injustice. Learning about these factors helps individuals and communities to better comprehend the root causes of safety challenges rather than the symptoms and advocate for systemic changes.
2. Addressing inequalities: Focusing on safety within Black and racially minoritised communities is an essential step in addressing social and racial inequalities. Safety concerns can be both a cause and a consequence of these disparities, so addressing them is a critical component of achieving social justice and equity.
3. Community empowerment: By learning about safety, Black and racially minoritised communities can become more empowered to take control of their own safety and advocate for policies and practices that prioritise the community's wellbeing. Education and awareness about safety can help foster community engagement and resilience.
4. Holistic approach to public health: Safety is a critical component of public health, and addressing safety concerns within Black and racially minoritised communities is integral to improving overall community wellbeing. This includes addressing issues such as access to healthcare, housing, education, and economic opportunities.

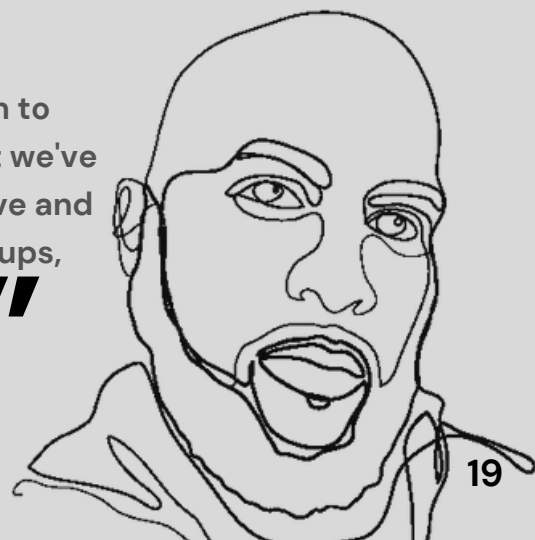
2. WHAT WE LEARNED

Tackling the subject of safety was no simple task. Right from the outset, it became clear that safety is a big concept – complex, nebulous and open to different interpretations across the wide range of contexts in which local community experts and participants worked. This insight from the group chimed with and allowed local experts to build on the learnings and framework developed around safety by Hanna Kubbutat-Byrne, Nathan Ardaiz and Kay Adekunle Rufai (2022) prior to the start of the 'The Black Systemic Safety Fund' process.

“ I think I had a sort of all round definition or approach to thinking about safety, but through the exploration that we've done, I've realised that actually safety is very subjective and it will look different to different people, different groups, different socio-economic backgrounds, etc. ”

Local Expert & Participant

Adrian Jones



Participants in the process described how they revisited the idea of safety consistently in the second phase of the U-process, as they worked towards a shared understanding of the concept:

“Every session we were asked: What does safety mean? And every session it changed. But I think that's okay. I think that's part of it. My concept of safety has broadened. Before I thought of safety as crime, law and order. As a result of the process I now think of safety as the ability to thrive... being able to navigate a particular aspect of life well. Whether that's in education, within your organisation, or as an individual. I see safety as an overarching theme; we have to think of our safety in order to truly thrive.”

Local Expert & Participant

“We talked about safety a hundred times.... I don't even know if I've got the concept yet. I don't even know if I can define it properly. So part of my own learning has been trying to define it.”

Local Expert & Participant

Was 'safety' too BIG and COMPLEX a concept?

For some participants, the process of revisiting and collectively exploring safety was in itself challenging. Since safety was such a big and complex idea, it became hard to grapple with. **Holding onto a clear definition of safety seemed to become more and more challenging** as the process progressed and participants were challenged to think about the topic in new ways. ⁶

“I think one of the things that has really gotten to me with this project was the framing of safety is such a big one. Because, in a sense, everything is about safety. ...And so I've been saying to myself: What's the framing for this work? Was it too big? Was it too broad? ...But at the end of the day, the world is not a safe place out there for many of us. So anything that we do to create more justice, more equity, will lead to more safety in a sense.”

Local Expert & Participant



Additionally, since Impact on Urban Health as the funder had established safety as the core theme and focus of the process, some participants had concerns around whether the approach to safety was intended to be prescriptive, constrained or limited in some way.

6. In many ways, this exploration of safety as a big and complex idea – an emergent property of the system – was typical of the kinds of insights surfaced through systems change processes as indicated in [Valente's \(2017\) article on 'Complexity Theories and Systems Thinking: Parallels and Differences.](#)

In essence, in earlier and middle stages of the process, participants questioned whether they were expected to think about safety more narrowly – considering fiscal, bodily or psychological safety and wellbeing in line with the funder’s imagined interests, for example – or whether they could trust that the funder was truly process-oriented and open to wider-ranging reflections, solutions and prototypes from the community.

Mid-Point Reflections on Safety from Participant

“ What I can tell you right now, is that I feel we haven't answered the question about how we improve safety for black communities in Lambeth and Southwark? ...We have had so many interesting conversations, and we have touched some ideas which would all be an element of improving safety. There have been really valuable conversations around what safety is, what safety isn't; coming to the understanding that there is not a clear black and white definition of safety; that safety can be so different from one person to another.... and I think that was quite relevant and pivotal for the journey. But I still feel that the concept and how to address safety isn't really clear and that this perhaps because we haven't come to the end of the process. **”**

In short, especially in earlier stages of the process, working through these questions required that participants and implementing partners alike take risks with each other. This involved learning to let go, trust the process, suspend judgement, and sit in the uncertainty of these questions as they collectively explored what safety meant to them.

It needed to be BIG...

By the end of the project, most participants agreed that exploring safety so openly had been a critical aspect of the process. Not only did it allow for fresh thinking around a complex issue, but also a more expanded focus on safety in ways that helped restore agency to local communities.

“ The truth of the matter is that some people suffer disadvantage because of their race in the system, because of their gender, and things like that. So if you want to help improve safety outcomes, you need to understand that the factors that will be will have to be addressed may have to be wider than a narrow health person's definition of what safety should be. **”**

Local Expert & Participant



“ We should be understanding of the fact that if you bring the subject of safety [to the table] it won't be interpreted narrowly by people who's lived experience is such that they need to bring a broad set of issues on board. ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ The issue of health for Black and minoritised people is multifaceted. ...It's to do with racism. And it's to do with lack of access to opportunities. It's to do with basic things like housing, you know. So it'd be naive to think that to address the issue effectively, you can ignore these other factors. ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ It would be naive for a funder to think that to effectively address an important single issue of safety, you can do that without taking on board the other causal factors which lead to the problem manifesting as we see it today. ...To be effective, you need to know how to deal with safety holistically within the limits of your resourcing. ”

Local Expert & Participant

Critically, in the safety exploration, this meant local experts from Black and racially minoritised communities held and shared the power to know and interpret for themselves what safety means within Lambeth and Southwark.

A Collective Interpretation of Safety...

The end result of the exploration, was that participants generated a shared understanding of safety as a broad and multifaceted concept including, but not limited to:

- Bodily safety and autonomy
- Psychological, emotional and spiritual safety
- The ability to contribute to society
- Freedom to live your life
- A feeling of belonging
- A sense of connection to others; collective/community power held together by a shared concern for social justice
- Access to assets, resources and the possibility of building generational wealth (i.e. a real capacity and/or pathway to living beyond survival mode)
- The ability to thrive across a whole range of arenas, systems and institutions (e.g. education, employment, health etc.)
- The ability to influence and exercise agency within systems and institutions (e.g. through initiatives like Operation Black Vote)
- The capacity to live free from fear or coercion (i.e. religious, interpersonal, or institutional)

“ Rather than using the language of inclusion and diversity in my work, I'm now more likely to use the word belonging. I'm more likely to ask: how do you achieve a sense of belonging and safety for the people that you care about? I'm now much more aware of my own safety. Of where I'm safe, and where I'm not safe. And aware of other people's feeling of safety. Because there's something about safety and freedom to express. I think it's key in pretty much every arena of life. **”**

Local Expert & Participant

“ We are all minorities... who are the most vulnerable. I have a sense of belonging and safety in this group despite being different from other members. So if you ask me, what does safety mean, then I'm going to tell you, it's trust. I believe we feel safe when we feel included. **”**

Local Expert & Participant

Conversely, a lack of safety was typically expressed as the absence of these things. Within systems and institutional settings, non-safety was thus associated with:

- Negative encounters with the police and the criminal justice system
- Exclusion from education and schooling; marginalisation within existing education services
- Lack of public infrastructure to ensure safety (e.g. poor lighting when people go for walks in local estates)
- Coercive religious practice or an over reliance on religion and spirituality to solve or bypass problems (i.e. 'go and pray' guidance for all issues)
- A lack of community assets (e.g. buildings or spaces for the community), resources and viable pathways to building generational wealth.
- Apathetic and selfish/individualised responses to shared concerns and problems within the community (i.e. 'every man for themselves' approach)
- A lack of community power and unity in the face of challenges (e.g. 'Operation Black Vote was set up to bring us together over policy but there isn't really anything else')
- A lack of adequate representation within public and private systems and institutions writ large

“ There is a lack of trust in institutions, in the police, in public services. **”**

Local Expert & Participant

Addressing Black Safety in Lambeth & Southwark...

Given the multifaceted dimensions of safety generated by the group, process participants noted that most, if not all, Black-led organisations within Lambeth and Southwark – including the organisations that process participants themselves led and/or were employed in – were in some way already working to ensure the safety of Black and racially minoritised groups locally.

As one local expert and participant pointed out during the course of the project, 25% of those participating in the safety process worked in organisations providing support services for children, including helping children and young people to develop essential skills that enhance resilience and health promotion. A further 33% of participating organisations were involved with supporting young adults to develop essential skills, which fundamentally improved their ability to operate within existing systems – for example, as part of the move from education into the world of work. This work could also be understood as cultivating the conditions for increased health and resilience. Finally, 17% of the process participants worked with adults that might be considered vulnerable and in need of affection, support, community and all the other things that contribute to a felt sense of safety. As a result, the work of all the organisations could be understood as follows::

“In the end, when you look at it very closely, all of our organisations work to enhance the seven principles of safety in the literature.”

Local Expert & Participant

However, a key challenge for most remains that many local organisations are themselves placed in consistently unsafe situations through their reliance on inadequate, inconsistent and unpredictable funding. Exacerbating this scenario further has been the reality that even when these local organisations have been able to secure consistent funding, it has typically been project-focussed work and initiatives rather than core operational costs or funds which build their capacity and sustainability.

“For many of us involved in the process, it's become very clear that improving the safety of BAME communities – including our own organisations on the front line – is contingent on ensuring that, at the bare minimum, our local organisations survive. And not just survive, but ideally thrive. That we are able to develop our capacity to roll out our services at scale. ...As a group, we believe that if we want to improve safety, it's crucial to make sure organisations on the frontline are well resourced. It's crucial that funders develop the capacity of these organisations going forward. And we are developing prototypes that acknowledge this need.”

Local Expert & Participant

Armed with this insight, process participants came up with a range of ideas to address issues of safety within the social lab. Among these, three key prototypes have been developed and taken forward, each of which is currently being implemented and tested by local community experts and process participants.

The first two of these prototypes – ‘Wakanda Assets’ and ‘Reimagining Funding’ – have emphasised addressing the precarity, instability and lack of predictability experienced by local organisations in relation to funds.

Both have thus focused on securing the safety of Black and racially minoritised communities, by developing the capacity and sustainability of local grassroots and community organisations already working to address safety – i.e. working on what groups have determined to be the root causes of a lack of safety. These prototypes have, in and of themselves, worked to shift power and resource even further into the hands of the community through the development of prototypes intended to offer even greater agency to local leaders, and reduce long-standing reliance on largely white and/or class-privileged funders. A third prototype, 'The Black Ofsted', focuses on addressing racial inequality within local education systems, securing the safety of younger Black and racially minoritised students in Lambeth and Southwark.

Observations

Shifting Mindsets

“In acknowledging the learnings from this exploration/approach, we recognise that many of our partners have expanded their perspectives on safety, delving into its multifaceted layers of this issue and how it exists within the broader landscape of health inequity. As a result, this exploration has prompted our partners to reassess their roles and contributions, which have traditionally focused on responding to community needs. Consequently, our partners are now considering other areas such as asset management and funding, despite these not being their primary skill sets. This acknowledgment signifies a shift in our partners' mindset, encouraging them to explore alternative paths, approaches in line with systems change theory to tackle health inequity. **”**

Experts and Beneficiaries

“While the partners involved bring expertise gathered through professional, lived, and learned experiences, we recognise the value of seeking insights from the beneficiaries or community members they serve within their respective roles and responsibilities. This was not something we explored within this work, however we recognize that This firsthand insight is crucial for developing effective and responsive solutions whilst also demonstrating a commitment to inclusive decision-making and allowing for greater scrutiny and feedback from those directly affected by the outcomes. **”**

Prototype 1: Assets & Wealth Generation (i.e. 'Wakanda Assets')

Group members: Candice, Hilna and Ira

Investing in Assets for Intergenerational Wealth and Economic Prosperity in Black and Racially Minoritised Communities

The Wakanda Assets Group, inspired by their own experiences of extending their own leases, and in addition to the mission of "A Place to Call Home," has devised a strategic plan to promote intergenerational wealth creation and economic prosperity within Black communities.

This initiative aims to address systemic barriers to safety, and has been inspired by the experiences of local leaders in the group who have lost their own resources and access to assets (e.g. community buildings) as a direct result of having critical funding withdrawn altogether or cut very suddenly, thus hampering their capacity to deliver key services which enhance the safety of Black communities.

Phase 1 of the project builds upon the foundation laid by The Ubele Initiative's Agbero 2100 project. This phase focuses on extending the project's reach to four organisations in Lambeth and Southwark, which have already secured physical infrastructure. By leveraging existing assets and amplifying community capabilities, Phase 1 aims to enhance economic sustainability. The overall goal is to strengthen the longevity of community-owned and led assets in these areas, thereby fostering resilience and self-reliance.

In Phase 2, the project shifts its focus towards enhancing community safety for Black individuals residing in Southwark and Lambeth. This involves providing professional advice and practical support to address a wide range of issues, including racism, discrimination, education, employment, housing, benefits, social services, and access to culturally appropriate mental health and wellbeing support. By tackling these multifaceted challenges, Phase 2 seeks to create safer and more inclusive environments where individuals can thrive and prosper.

Through these strategic interventions, the Wakanda Assets Group aims to create vital infrastructure through practical and positive change, promoting economic empowerment, social justice, and overall well-being within Black and racially minoritised communities.

Prototype 2: Funding (i.e. 'Reimagining Funding')

Group members: Chris, Adrian, Margaret, Juliana, Duro and Angie

The Reimagining Group, composed of six Black and racially minoritised leaders from Lambeth and Southwark, is dedicated to equitable grant funding.

During the initial COVID-19 lockdown in March-April 2020, Karl Murray's survey commissioned by The Ubele Initiative revealed that 9 out of 10 BAME community organisations were at risk of closure due to insufficient reserves, impacting 15,000 to 20,000 users.

Inspired by Murray's findings and the Impact on Urban Health safety social lab learning, the 'Radically Reimagining Funding of Social Issues' group developed the Grant Funding Draft System (GFDS) to foster collaboration among funders and address structural weaknesses in the funding system. Core to the GFDS has been the development of a model which aims to:

- Address and remedy power imbalances in the relationship between funders and local community organisations as grantees
- Advance an approach that moves away from "charitable" approaches rooted in a deficit model, and towards a more equal relationship rooted in partnership

Move towards an approach emphasising reparations and rectifying historical injustices over philanthropic approaches rooted in paternalistic assumptions

To meet these aims, the GFDS proposes a ranking system for grant applicants based on eligibility, impact, innovation, and sustainability. This approach aims to enhance transparency, encourage a shift in intention of funders to invest to address social issues, promote diversity, and foster collaboration and innovation within the grant-making process.

Prototype 3: Race Equity in Education: Safeguarding as Safety in Schools (i.e. The Black Ofsted)

Group Members: Shani, Suzann, Joel and Katrina

The Black Ofsted group have designed a project that aims to explore and address the systemic issues of racial injustice within the education system. It acknowledges the existence of racial disparities in education and aims to address them by implementing policies and practices that promote equality, fairness and safety.

During the prototyping phase the group discovered that there are a number of organisations already working in this field. The group identified the need for an exploratory project to examine the effectiveness and shortcomings of already established race equality charters. This information would be instrumental in constructing a comprehensive charter that encompasses all the essential elements needed for systemic change.

In the next phase of the project, the group aims to leverage existing strengths and resources within the education system to address the issues and challenges that hinder Black pupils from experiencing a sense of value, respect and protection from discrimination, harassment and other forms of harm. By identifying and building upon the assets within the educational environment, such as supportive staff, community partnerships, and inclusive curriculum frameworks, the group intends to implement sustainable measures that foster positive change. This approach emphasises empowering individuals and institutions to utilise their inherent strengths and capacities to effect meaningful and lasting transformations in support of Black students' well-being and success. Work will be undertaken in three stages:

- **Stage 1.** Round Table Talk Discussions
- **Stage 2.** Information Gathering, Analysis, Sharing and Evaluation
- **Stage 3.** The development and execution of a case study

Through this approach, the group will lay a solid foundation for embedding race equity in education and creating a more equitable and inclusive educational system for all. In the long term, the Race Equity in Education Project aims to bring about significant changes, including:

1. **Culture Shift:** Transforming the prevalent white supremacy culture within educational institutions to one that is inclusive, supportive, and empowering for Black children.
2. **Mental Models:** Shifting the perspectives and attitudes of educators, administrators, and pupils to cultivate understanding, empathy, and equity.

3. Institutional Practice Reform: Revising policies and implementing institutional practices that embed trust and belonging for Black individuals, both within and outside the education system.

4. Thriving Black Youth: Empowering Black pupils to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially, contributing to their overall safety, success and well-being.

A fourth prototype around **Crime, Justice & Policing** has also been proposed, and participants have reserved a portion of funding to do further thinking around how they might collectively tackle what they acknowledge to be a very important safety issue for Black and racially minoritised communities in Lambeth and Southwark. This decision to pool funding to return to a focus on crime, justice and policing at the end of the process (i.e. in the final residential and beyond) has been an important insight in itself – Black community leaders have valued the opportunity to consider safety beyond a narrow lens inflected by whiteness and white systems, but also recognise the importance and urgency of tackling issues in this arena on their own terms having had the space to be unburdened by this expectation.

3. KEY TAKEAWAYS

The answer to the question “what does safety mean to for Black and other racially minoritised communities?” is not straightforward. Having suffered a history of systemic racism, economic inequality, and social injustice the question of safety is both loaded and multifaceted.

This group of community leaders essentially felt empowered with the opportunity to take the detours necessary to dive into the concept of safety and what it means to each of them and their communities.

“ This process has been a beautiful example of what it means to work systemically.

The group really worked on the underlying patterns, structures, and mental models that are causing a lack of safety (i.e. racial justice in education, need for ownership of assets, the way funding is structured). They were able to go beyond the superficial, visible level and really looked at the systemic structures that are keeping the problematic situation as it is. ”

Yannick Wassmer, Senior Consultant, Reos Partners

A safe container and experienced facilitators were a cornerstone in ensuring participants were able to move through the process of defining and reinterpreting what safety meant for them, in the broadest possible terms. Part of what made the container safe was not just the established social lab methodology, but more critically, the opportunity to take part in a process led by Black and racially minoritised facilitators and participants, and others who have explicitly expressed solidarity with these groups in non-performative ways.

This created a space in which difficult conversations and lived experience could be brought into the room, without the degree of voyeurism, nonrecognition and fragility that might otherwise be expected in white and/or other 'professional' spaces inflected and shaped by whiteness.

“Some group members spoke to me about the safety of being in a largely Black room, with Michael and Yannick as facilitators. They said it is very rare to be in such spaces, and how they exhaled when they came in, knowing they could be themselves in ways that are rarely possible in work settings.”

Radhika Bynon, Portfolio Manager, Impact on Urban Health

Given the exploratory nature of this process, however, one key take away is to acknowledge that some participants will inevitably feel more frustration with detours and protracted nature discussion of the issues – most especially those working around issues of bodily safety and at the hardest ends of systems (e.g. within criminal justice, or domestic violence scenarios). A key learning therefore is the need to balance the need for expansive discussion of the complex issue at hand, and the more immediate needs for action and intervention identified by those community experts and practitioners most negatively impacted by the issue (i.e. a lack of safety).

“I think that there were a couple of meetings where we had to trust. And the process of trusting is really difficult. ...In those difficult conversations, as facilitators, we just had to say, 'No, relax, we'll get there, we'll get there. I promise you. I promise you, we'll get there. ...Even when you yourself are not sure exactly how.”

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative



Finally, an especially important takeaway from the process has been the clarion call of local experts who have emphasised through their development of prototypes how communities themselves might have an expanded and sustained role in determining how funds are spent to tackle wide-ranging issues of safety. Primarily, this has included the call to ensure support for community organisations which moves beyond project-based financial support and towards long term funding for operational costs and capacity development, which will work to ensure the sustainability of organisations working to address safety on the front lines.

Radhika Bynon

“Whatever we decide about how money should be distributed, one of the key things that our organisations need is non-financial support. Because we might be tackling the right issues; we might be passionate about doing so... but have we got the experience and the skill in order to manage whatever we are supposed to be doing effectively?”

Local Expert & Participant

About participatory grant-making

1. CONTEXT

Central to ‘The Black Systemic Safety Fund’ has been an emphasis on developing novel approaches to positioning Black and racially minoritised community leaders as experts who should be at the forefront of decision-making around how to frame, address and fund systemic challenges related to safety. To support this learning, Impact on Urban Health contracted The Ubele Initiative and Reos Partners to design a process that would place £500K directly into the hands of local Black community leaders and experts.

What we wanted to learn...

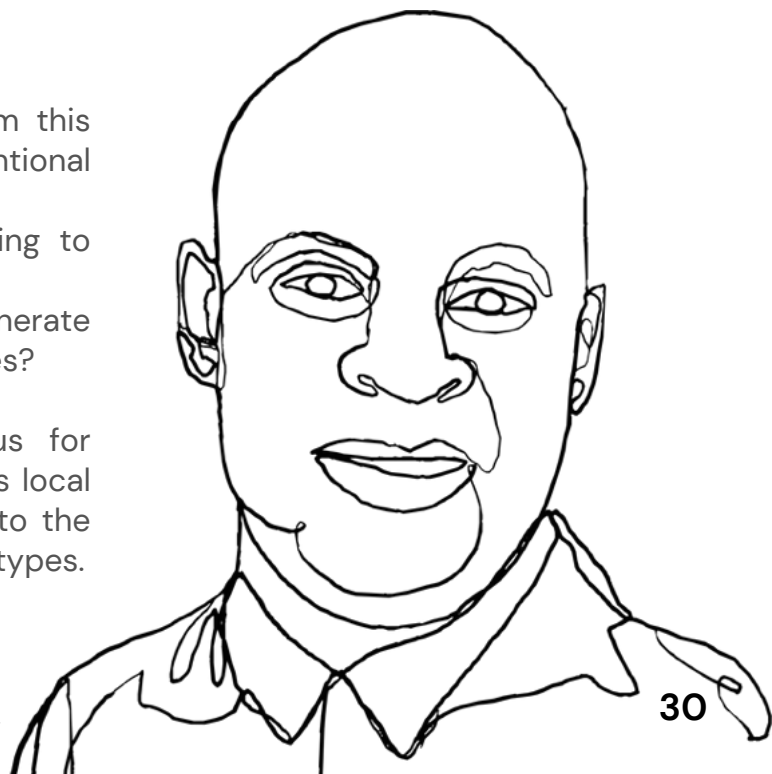
A key part of the learning associated with this process has been to track how local experts and community leaders both participate in and fundamentally question, challenge and improve existing funding structures. This includes learning more about devolving decision-making on funding to local people. For Impact on Urban Health, key questions guiding our learning in this area include:

- As funders, how can we enable community-based experts to make effective, innovative, ambitious funding decisions?
- What are we learning about mechanisms for devolving decision-making and power to communities?
- What are we learning about the challenges of devolving in relation to our charitable objectives?

In addition, as the process has come to a conclusion, some additional questions have emerged including:

- How are the outcomes different from this funding process, versus a more conventional grant design?
- Do we think that the funding is going to impactful places?
- Did the process of allocating funds generate any additional or unexpected outcomes?

These latter questions will be a focus for learning among the implementing team as local experts and community leaders move into the process of delivering on their safety prototypes.



Why it was important to learn about this:

Learning about participatory grantmaking has been important for several reasons:

- 1. Democratising Funding:** Participatory grantmaking, at least theoretically, empowers communities and individuals to have a say in how funds are distributed. It shifts the decision-making power from a select few to a broader group, promoting inclusivity in the allocation of resources.
- 2. Community Empowerment:** It allows communities to identify and interpret their own needs and priorities. By involving those directly affected by the issues being addressed, participatory grantmaking ensures that resources are allocated to projects and initiatives that are relevant and meaningful to the community.
- 3. Innovation and Local Expertise:** Community members often have unique insights and knowledge about the challenges and opportunities in their own neighbourhoods. Participatory grantmaking taps into this local expertise, fostering innovative solutions that may not have been apparent to external grantmakers.
- 4. Building Trust:** Participatory grantmaking builds trust between funders and the communities they serve. When communities have a voice in decision-making, they are more likely to trust the intentions of the funding organisation and feel that their concerns are being heard.
- 5. Long-term Impact:** By involving the community in grantmaking decisions, there is a greater likelihood of achieving long-term impact. Projects and initiatives are more likely to be sustainable and responsive to evolving community needs.
- 6. Equity and Social Justice:** Participatory grantmaking can help address systemic inequalities by ensuring that marginalised and underrepresented communities have a seat at the table. When adopted well it can be a powerful tool for advancing social justice and equity.
- 7. Learning and Adaptation:** Funders can learn valuable lessons about the communities they serve through participatory grantmaking. They can gain a deeper understanding of local contexts, which can inform future funding strategies and priorities.

2. WHAT WE LEARNED

Throughout the process, there have been several especially important insights around participatory grantmaking and funding systems. These have included that:



David Bryan

The timing of conversations about money is critical...

Having local communities involved in funding decisions requires robust and sometimes uncomfortable conversations around money and resources. Within the 'The Black Systemic Safety Fund' process, local experts knew from the outset that they were signing up to be part of a process in which they themselves would be responsible for funding decisions. Nonetheless, as part of their social lab methodology, the implementing partners opted to delay actions, decisions and explicit conversations about money until later in the process.

This allowed participants in the process to first build trust, connection and a capacity to reflect together on safety, before moving onto more challenging questions of resourcing.

...But receives varied responses...

Especially in earlier stages of the project, the decision to hold off on important conversations around resourcing, was met with a range of different responses. For some participants, delaying the focus on money within a process intended to address participatory grantmaking, was unexpected and surprising, though not unwelcome.

“ I wondered at first, should we be doing more? In the first residential we all had to create group conversations, and everyone could go to different places, if you wanted to pose a question to the group. I asked straight away, 'What do you think we should do with the money?' Because I really wanted to drive something concrete. And no one came to my table. No one. Not one single human being.So I thought, 'Oh, wow. Okay, everyone is flowing with this. I'm really, really going to need to let go of this need to control and get to the outcome. I'm going to need to flow with it now too **”**

Local Expert & Participant

“ It would have been great if discussions about money had come earlier in the process; it could have had a real impact on deciding how the money might be spent. But, to me, there are two things to balance here: one is the process and how people come together and relationships are built. That is valuable in itself. But there's also the value of getting the money out the door to people. ...The challenge for us is thinking about doing something really different from what we would normally do: So this was an opportunity to get money out the door in a way that's different from what we would normally do. **”**

**Kamna Muralidharan, Programme Director,
Impact on Urban Health**

Kamna Muralidharan



The majority, however, were happy to go along with the process and delay the conversation. In many cases, they were equally if not more motivated by the opportunity to connect and collaborate with other local leaders and experts, and excited by the chance to exchange knowledge, insight and experience with peers.

In addition, for several, the decision to delay conversations around money was a critical part of what worked about the process, and something that could be discussed more explicitly as local leaders built up relationships of trust. As two process participants shared towards the end of the process, conversations about money could be tricky for local experts and leaders, since they were typically placed in a position of competing over funding.

One pair in the group noted, for example, that despite meeting and encountering one another many times over the years, they had never had the opportunity collaborate prior to the social lab. As a result, in the past, when they had heard of each other's funding success, there had been a degree of instinctive questioning and competition: 'How did they get that? Why not us?' For both process participants the lab had been an important space in which to disrupt this dynamic; however, it had been essential first to establish trust undermined by the instability of the local funding context. To use their own words, having conversations around money any earlier would have "felt very dangerous" and might potentially have "risked damaging their relationship".

Money mindsets need processing and unpacking...

In some cases, taking time before talking about money, met another need: the desire to avoid uncomfortable or tricky conversations that could undermine trusting relationships built with others in the group.

Several participants noted in interviews and workshops that money is an inherently emotive topic – one which can be difficult to discuss for a whole range of reasons. These include:

- **Competition over Funding:** Local experts and leaders were coming together in a context where they were typically pushed into competition with one another over funding and thus felt cautious about opening up and playing further into this dynamic.
- **Individual Trauma:** Several participants were able to be vulnerable, noting how conversations about money surfaced early childhood trauma and anxiety that had to be worked through internally in order to show up effectively to a collective conversation.
- **Collective Baggage and Systemic Exclusion:** Individual anxiety about money was frequently tied to the systemic issues participants in the safety process were seeking to address. For some, the challenges associated with talking about money were directly tied to their own lived experience of racial and class-based inequalities. Addressing conversations about money therefore required reflection and the development of a shared language to name these inequities and explore their historical roots.



- **Shifting Positionality & Self Concept:** Since most participants had never been in a position to make decisions around funding, and were instead accustomed to pursuing it, talking about money as grant-givers for the first time required a shift in thinking and mental models. This process in itself was confronting and destabilising for some.

“ When we came in we knew the project was about Black safety. ...I think what was powerful initially was that they said that you will have a large pot of money. And you will dictate how that money – which was in the region of £400K – is spent in the community. ...I was like, 'Okay... Either you lot are nuts, or you already know what you're going to do. **”**

Local Expert & Participant

For this reason, even once space was opened up to engage in questions of money, some participants were initially cautious, anxious and concerned about the pace of the process. Some shared fears of 'getting it wrong' by moving into decisions too quickly, and a few privately questioned whether they themselves had a right to hold power and make decisions on behalf of the community about the disbursement of funding.

Among these groups it was felt that more time was needed to work on safety ideas and prototypes, and to build and deepen relationships:

“ I think it's too early to have a pot of money to just be spent. I would use money to further test and trial or work with us to develop a concept or a couple of concepts. I still feel there's some training – some more work time together – to work through our ideas. There is something about working through ideas together in a safe space with facilitators, rather than being left alone to work out how we should spend the money. **”**

Local Expert & Participant

Incidentally, a key moment of learning and exchange from the final workshop was that funders from racially minoritised backgrounds – people who were also present in the room – could themselves relate to this anxiety. The burden of responsibility was shifted to a much wider group of people than funders themselves, just as the process had intended. However, this shifting of the burden raises new and potentially difficult issues for Black and racially minoritised communities and raises significant issues around the importance of safeguarding and sufficiently remunerating local leaders engaged in participatory grant making processes.

Courageous Conversations and Novel Participatory Approaches

Moving forward with the process and making funding decisions ultimately required courageous and well-facilitated conversations

In the final workshop, it became clear that **lighthearted, participatory approaches to conversations** – including a facilitated exercise in which local experts playfully discussed and bargained over their shared pot of money in both smaller and larger groups – were critical tools in moving an otherwise very serious process along and out of ‘stuckness’.



In the final workshop, it became clear that lighthearted, participatory approaches to conversations – including a facilitated exercise in which local experts playfully discussed and bargained over their shared pot of money in both smaller and larger groups – were critical tools in moving an otherwise very serious process along and out of ‘stuckness’.

// I worry that when funders devolve funding decisions to community leaders without allowing time for trust building, they risk damaging relationships between those leaders. Where there is limited trust, differences of opinion about how money should be spent could create rifts that make it harder for those community leaders to work together, which would be disastrous and irresponsible **//**

Radhika Bynon, Portfolio Manager, Impact on Urban Health

While money decisions were arrived at fairly quickly in practice as part of the final residential workshop, an important further stage of the process, has been that participants in the process have been able to step back and reflect on the decisions made alongside the implementing partners beyond the final workshop. This has included a protracted process between November 2023 and April 2024, which is still ongoing, and through which local community leaders and experts have been required to write up a series of proposals indicating how their prototypes effectively address safety locally (i.e. the learning and funding session in March 2024 and the preparatory proposals submitted prior to this workshop). These proposals provide an overview of each prototype and are accompanied by budgets, justifications, rationales and a loose theory of change articulating how each aims to tackle local safety issues

Questions about Funder's Power in PGM processes...

The process of writing up these prototype proposals has instituted additional accountability mechanisms into the participatory grant making process, and served as a means of communicating outcomes of the prototyping phase to colleagues responsible for disbursing funds at Impact on Urban Health – most especially those colleagues who have not been directly involved with the social lab.

However, while this move towards accountability is likely welcomed by some at Impact on Urban Health, the process has received a lukewarm, and even hostile and skeptical responses among some local experts and community leaders. More critical process participants have experienced the requirement to write up their prototypes as a form of additional labour signalling a lack of trust on the part of the funder – an additional expectation and burden associated with the process, which they feel was not communicated clearly enough at the outset (and which was perhaps impossible for the funder to anticipate in a pilot project). Additionally, the requirement to write up and submit prototypes has not only been seen as an exercise which has extended and unnecessarily duplicated work and thinking already undertaken by local leaders as part of a protracted social lab process, but also served to recreate and reproduce the traditional expectation of writing grant proposals. This has been received as especially troubling within the piloting of a funding model that was originally intended and pitched as to transform philanthropy, fundamentally disrupt the status quo and equalise the funder-grantee relationship.

For this reason, several participants have privately questioned the participatory grant making model employed currently. The most critical among these have characterised the final stages of the process as reflecting and reinforcing of a status quo dynamic in which the funder continues to 'dangle the carrot' of funds in the face of communities, at times 'moving and shifting goal posts', making communities 'jump through hoops', and acting as 'gate-keepers' to the £500K funding advertised at the outset. This impression has in some ways undermined some of the trust built up over the social lab process, and led at least one previously enthusiastic participant to question: "Do we even want this money with all these conditions attached after all is said and done? And do we have the time and energy to carry on with a new beginning and implementing a new safety initiative after jumping through all these hoops, when we have already given so much?"

While this has undoubtedly been far from what was intended among those funders who have been most closely involved in the social lab process, these more critical reflections do make plain the questions and tensions around:

- The difficulty for funders in anticipating and predicting what accountability mechanisms will be required for the disbursement of funding in an evolving and open PGM process;⁷
- The need to communicate transparently around how the disbursement of funds will occur at the outset of PGM processes, and to be clear about any conditions attached to the disbursement of funds at the outset of PGM processes;
- The changes in culture and structure that need to be made by funders wishing to pursue PGM processes, including the need to remove and/or address barriers to unnecessarily bureaucratic accountability processes (e.g. if inappropriate to remove the requirement to write up, support could be provided to process participants for writing up prototypes during the social lab and prototyping phases and/or lighter touch mechanisms could be explored including removing the emphasis on writing);
- The process of instituting processes of reflective practice for funders who are well intentioned, but will ultimately face challenges in letting go and moving away from reproducing the status quo in ways that truly devolve decision making and power to communities.

“ I think that our funder didn't have enough of an understanding of how to run an entire process like this before we got going. ...I remember there was one meeting, when one of the funders actually just wanted to take the whole thing back and make the decisions for the group. And we had to say, 'Are you trusting the process?' It was clear that they weren't totally trusting of the process because they couldn't yet see the end of it or where the groups were going to arrive. So I think that there's some learning for us to grapple with as an implementing team about making sure that the funder understands process, rather than getting scared along with process participants. There is also something about making sure the funder is willing to stick with the process and truly let go rather than wanting to take the groups into action prematurely, which is what they will intuitively want to do. Or to hold back funds if things go off in a different direction. **”**

Quote from Implementing Team Reflection Session

7. There are significant concerns and questions about whether funder should have a role in determining the conditions and mechanisms for disbursing funder at all, and there are good reasons to suggest that this responsibility should be devolved entirely to communities if there is to be any real shift in the balance of power between funder and grantee.



“ It's hard for a funder who's spent their social capital moving forward on a pilot project they really believe in. Especially if you don't know you have the backing of your bosses, or when the outcomes and end points of the process you have funded are not yet clear and can take a while to materialise. Funders tend to like accountability, clear outcomes, certainty, demonstrated value for money, a clear focus on 'charitability', management of risk, and so on. But this process is necessarily open-ended and about taking risks and challenging existing practice. So if you work within an organisational culture that has less experience or natural affinity for that way of working, it's going to be a very anxiety-inducing process to sit with. It will feel counter-culture. And maybe even like you are part of an institutional structure that isn't equipped to deal with such big questions, unless a safe space is actively created to dig deeper with colleagues. ”

Quote from Implementing Team Reflection Session

Challenging the Paradigm and Disrupting the Status Quo...

By the end of the process, implementing partners and participants agreed that they had met their shared objective of devolving funding decisions to local experts. However, it was also obvious that engaging in the 'The Black Systemic Safety Fund' process had thrown up new and important insights and learnings that both challenge and go well beyond a focus on participatory grantmaking alone.

As part of this process, participants collectively named a range of current problems within philanthropy including...

- The nature of the relationship and power imbalance between funders and local experts, practitioners and communities
- The bureaucratic and, at times, controlling nature of grant funding application and reporting systems which take time away from the 'real work' of systems change
- The tendency to view Black and racially minoritised communities as being somehow responsible for systemic inequity and in deficit
- The limitations of participatory grantmaking as a frame and especially the fact that:
 - Funders continue to hold the power and set the terms of engagement – e.g. how much resource is available to be spent and over what time period
 - Funders, while well intentioned, continue to operate according to bureaucratic principles, requiring write ups and justifications of prototypes to secure and release funds
 - Funding allocated to PGM processes around complex issues continues to be limited and less than would be ideal to address long-standing systemic inequities
 - There is an emphasis on spending and allocating money rather than acquiring community assets and wealth in ways that would genuinely ensure agency of communities
- A lack of challenge to existing paradigms, in which the significant wealth of current funders is often tied to histories of, imperialism, colonisation and slavery

“ To make our organisations work we have to apply for ten thousand grants – ten thousand here, ten thousand there – it’s a very controlling system. ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ What I think is a problem is that we have the power structure whereby the funder determines what issue is addressed, how long it’s addressed for, and who actually gets the resource to address it. What gets supported is the people who write good bids and good reports. And the funders, tick the box. And that’s it. Even though that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re going to be effective in delivering that project. ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ You see, the thing that the practitioners resent and are really struggling with is the unfair power structure between the funders, and the doers. And the fact that the funder has this pot of money, that he knows people are desperate to get. Because of that, grantees are prepared to endure whatever process or whatever challenges you put in front of them, in order to get access to money. And I can tell you that, even though they may not articulate that fact very well, it is a pain point for practitioners. ...And it’s not only with this fund, it’s generally within philanthropy: it appears as if “white saviour has got money, they want to save poor Black people, and is dangling the money, you need to do this to get access to it. ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ The question is, are funders brave enough to look at and reimagine funding? To do a bit of navel-gazing and explore the big questions: ‘What is wrong with us? What can we do better? Help us shape what we can do collaboratively? ...Because in a sense, we, the community, are the patient. And you’re telling us to go and self-diagnose the issues and help other people. ...Actually, you need to start listening to what we say about our bodies and how it works. Right now, when you prod us and we say ouch, you keep prodding us. We’ve kept saying for years, we can’t live on two or three years funding. Yet you keep giving us 2 years funding. So you keep prodding us with the same stick. Something’s got to change. ”

Local Expert & Participant

Rianna Raymond-Williams



“ Practitioners look at the issue like: in the end, some of that money you got through slavery and exploitation. So, in effect, it is our money in some ways. As practitioners, we resent this power dynamics between the funder and grantees. And that is one of the main reasons why, in our group, Reimagining Funding, we came up with this new idea: A pot is created – we call it community capital budget. Philanthropists, foundations and trusts will receive tax relief for setting up their foundations and will be required to contribute money into this pot. And the distribution of this money is done by the community. **”**

Local Expert & Participant



Working through issues with the funder in the room...

Because of these power dynamics, and the existing challenges, there were questions right from the outset about whether the funder should be part of the process at all. In the end, having funders in the room proved critical in beginning to address and move through questions about the existing funding landscape. While many of these big questions remain unresolved – and there is clearly still much to learn in future – it is obvious that participants and implementing partners alike value having spaces to engage directly with funders around the issues that matter most.

“...The magic is what happens between you and the participants in the room... And that magic was added to in this project by Radhika, and Rianna, and Kamna being in the space. ...We spent a long time, Yannick and I, talking about if we wanted them to be in this space, because it could have really unsettled the space. Because they come with a million pounds, and it's a lot of power. But actually, it was wonderful to have them there. Because they were so generous in the way that they fought with us. There were lots of moments where some deep and difficult conversations needed to be had, and they never skirted them. They insisted that we had them. It just made the whole project so much more rich. **”**

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative

For many, the presence of funders in the room was seen as a central aspect of how change should be done in future, even though it felt like a new, unfamiliar and strange dynamic.

“ It is really wonderful that the funders have been part of this process. ...I haven't experienced that before. Often the funder kind of sits outside of it. And I think one of the challenges with this work is it's almost impossible to translate it into paper. I hope that the insights gathered in the process might have quite a fundamental impact on at least how the funders fund future work. For me that might eventually then translate to shifts on a systemic level or systems change level. **”**

Yannick Wassmer, Senior Consultant, Reos Partners



// I thought it was good for the funder to be there. I think they were able to answer questions from a funders perspective at times. They had something to contribute in the space; their experience of funding, and their frustrations. That they were trying to make changes internally... systemic changes in the way funding is distributed. And they could see problems, and they could share some of those insights with us. **//**

Local Expert & Participant

// It felt really strange to have the funder in the room, and you could tell that there was kind of trying to move it on, and trying to move it to certain places. But they just had to allow us to see through the process, because the journey itself in that process unlocked a lot of our dormant thinking or unknown areas of thought. **//**

Local Expert & Participant

// The funder has been amazing. They are so committed and understands the work that we're doing and have had our backs, in a sense. **//**

Local Expert & Participant

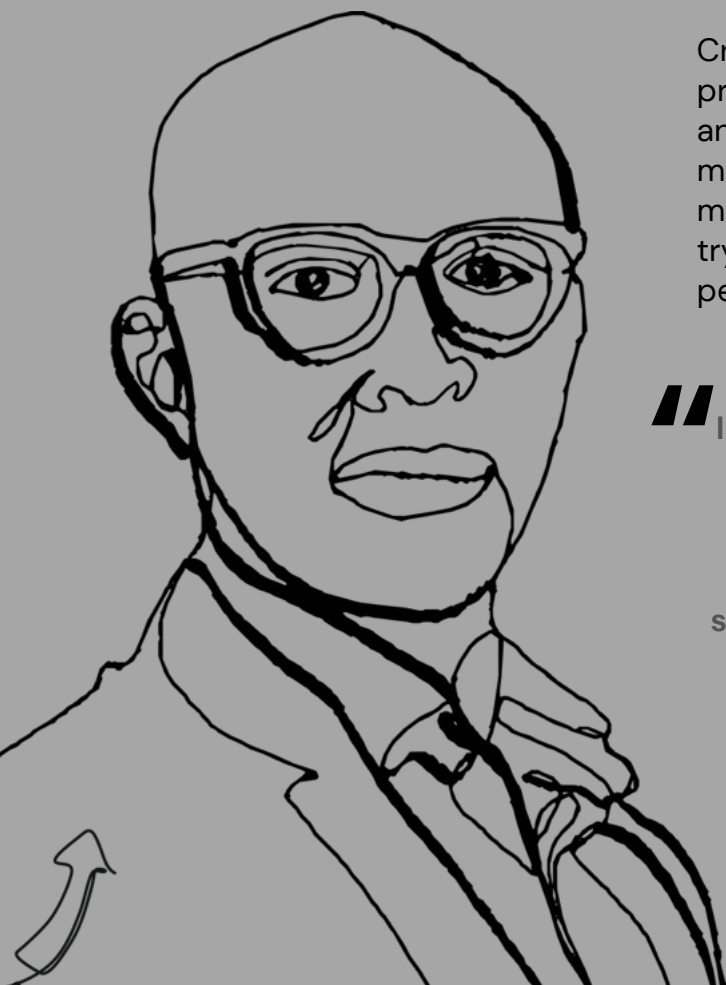
// For me the next step would be to work with multiple funders in the room... for them to experience this way of working. ...this might lead to a different way of how things are getting funded. **//**

Local Expert & Participant

Critically though, several noted that the funders present in the room were already known to them, and people who were also from racially minoritised backgrounds. This, participants felt, meant they 'got the issues' local experts were trying to address and were aligned on values – perhaps because of their own lived experience.

// I don't think any funder could have been part of the process. Yes, it was of critical importance that they have a shared lived experience... AND I think it also required something of the people from IoUH in the way they showed up in the process. **//**

**Yannick Wassmer, Senior Consultant,
Reos Partners**



2. KEY TAKEAWAYS

Having conversations about money and resources can be tricky and challenging. While adopting participatory grantmaking processes and devolving funding decisions to communities is an incredibly important step in transforming philanthropy, and funders clearly have a role to play in facilitating networks of collaboration rather than competition amongst grantees, there is still much to learn about what more can be done in partnership with Black and racially minoritised communities. Critically much of this learning should involve exploring ways of improving and going well beyond PGM processes, which have been by some process participants as not going far enough.

As we work towards change, it is valuable to have the funder in the room. Doing so can help to transform and equalise the relationship between funder and grantee, at least relationally if not yet structurally. But this work requires that a safe enough container is formed for all present. While having more funders in the room has potential to create a bigger impact in shifting mental models and eventually the culture and system of funding, **it is important to ensure this work is done well.** This might mean doing upfront work with especially white and/or class-privileged funders – or those simply drawn into reproducing existing systems – to consider new ways of being and acting, before moving into conversations with communities. Part of this work might include **creating spaces for funders to reflect bravely and with curiosity on their own power and positionality**, and to develop a tolerance for difficult conversations around resourcing racial justice oriented work before moving to action. Ultimately, the success of such interventions can only be measured by action and community perceptions as to how able funders are to **share power with those directly affected by local issues.**

“ We put a lot of money into this process. And it requires this kind of resource. It's a process grounded in generosity – both in terms of time, cost and relational exchange – and I think it's important for other funders to know that this is required. ”

Radhika Bynon, Portfolio Manager, Impact on Urban Health

“ It's good for funders to hear directly from organisations on the front line; hearing the challenges and changes that need to be made. We need more funders in the room. We need people beyond Black and brown funders in the room, because they already understand the issue; we need the white funders that don't understand the issue in the room because Black and Brown funders can only do so much. They're one individual that comes from the community.I'm pretty sure the people that were in that mix have already been saying these things, in some of those internal meetings and conversations. Nothing's changed. ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ This project has helped us explore how we share our power as a funder – letting go of decision making around the criteria and scope of local initiatives we invest in. In many ways the practice of letting go has been even more valuable than devolving decision making about funding; it’s fundamentally challenged how we, as funders, understand and assign meaning to local issues. It’s allowed us to understand how local issues are experienced by the people our work is intended to support. This has meant participants have been able to speak for themselves, assigning meaning and value to local initiatives based on their lived experience. Ultimately, it’s pushed us to recognise the agency and expertise of local communities in ways that are positive. ”

Kamna Muralidharan, Programme Director, Impact on Urban Health

Concrete recommendations are provided on how to shift the funding model in the Re-imagining Funding prototype group, and within thought pieces offered by participants as part of our report series on the Black Systemic Safety Fund process. .

About the Process

1. CONTEXT

What we wanted to learn:

The ‘The Black Systemic Safety Fund’ initiative adopted a social lab approach to support the group of local leaders (i.e. the committee of experts) to look at safety from new perspectives, and as a way of taking a systems-thinking approach to funded solutions.

As part of the process, we want to learn about the value of this type of approach – both for the group, and in support the implementing team to achieve their goals of devolving decision making about funds to local communities. Important questions guiding our learning included:

- What outcomes is the Black Systemic Safety Fund process contributing to?
- What about the process is leading to these outcomes?
- How do different actors experience the process?
- How might we improve future PGM and Black-led systems change processes?

In addition, given the context of Lambeth and Southwark, implementing partners were also keen to understand more about the value of adopting these participatory and systems thinking processes within Black and racially minoritised communities. Key questions here included:

- What are we learning about truly hearing Black and racially minoritised people to speak their truth?
- Does it make a difference that the process included all Black and racially minoritised facilitators and participants?

Why it was important to learn about this:

Understanding how participants experienced this process and methodology was important for several reasons:

1. **Facilitating Change:** Systems change efforts can be complex and challenging. It is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of how to effectively facilitate change.
2. **Assessing the applicability of social labs for Black and racially minoritised communities:** Given the historical and ongoing marginalisation and systemic inequities faced by Black and racially minoritised communities, it was particularly important to assess the applicability and usefulness of these methods within minoritised communities.
3. **Understanding how to best adapt methods:** It's essential to cultivate an environment conducive to the thriving of Black and racially minoritised communities and experts in such settings. This entails understanding how methods should be adapted and tailored to better suit their needs.

“ I think there's a lot of talk about giving voice to people and giving people ownership, but often that's not really reflected in the actual process and how you design the process, how you craft a process. How do you design a process that actually has everybody's voice into a room and where their ideas are being heard and actually are taken forward? The question for us was how do you create a safe space – a safe container within a group – where people can actually show up at their best selves, as creative human beings. ”

Yannick Wassmer, Senior Consultant, Reos Partners

2. WHAT WE LEARNED

Overall, the social lab process – including theory U and a range of other participatory approaches adopted by the facilitation team – was received very well amongst the group, even if it was experienced as an uncomfortable and unfamiliar way of working for many in the room.

What has been valuable about the social lab method...

Local community experts shared extensively how the social lab approach created a **safe container** in which local experts and leaders could build trust and form new relationships of solidarity. In some cases, this served to disrupt existing dynamics of competition over funding and support among local community leaders from Black and racially minoritised groups, who have been historically under-resourced – a matter already addressed in section two of this report.

In addition, the adoption of theory U, which is described earlier in section one of this report, offered the group a **shared language** with which to track and describe the evolving and at times destabilising experimental process to which participants had committed themselves.

“ I think this {U} process does offer a sense of language... and the opportunity to turn language into a sense of possibility. ”

Local Expert & Participant

Especially important was the fact that the collaborative social lab approach created space in which facilitators could integrate a range of **novel methods and participatory approaches** to thinking about safety as a complex issue. In addition to Theory U, the adoption of ‘the Cynefin framework’ and ‘the Yam activity’ – an adaptation of systems change iceberg– stood out as approaches that were especially useful to process participants and discussed in some detail within interviews.^{8 9}

“ I have quite some history of being involved in designing and implementing projects. So I pay particular attention to some of the processes that are involved, and the tools being used. ...I found quite a number of the approaches and workshop tools to be really novel. And quite a good learning experience for someone like me, because I’ve seen a number of projects, and there is a different dimension to this project, which I have found innovative. ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ I’m quite interested in the U process, this is the first time I’ve come across it. And I’m very intentionally wanting to learn what it is. ...How it is supposed to be used in practice. ...I have read all the books I can find on it. ...And I’m invested in knowing how effective the U theory is... and actually works in practice. ”

Local Expert & Participant

8. The Cynefin Framework was developed to help leaders understand their challenges, and to make decisions in context. By distinguishing different domains (the subsystems) in which leaders operate, the framework recognises that our actions need to match the reality we find ourselves in through a process of sense-making. This helps leaders cultivate an awareness of what is really complex, and what is not; and to respond accordingly so that no energy is wasted in overthinking or in seeking to make the complex fit into standard solutions. For a more detailed description of the Cynefin Framework, see the link here:

<https://thecynefin.co/about-us/about-cynefin-framework/>

9. The systems change iceberg is a model that helps systems change activists to explore the root causes of key issues in a systems, and the complex and interrelated nature of these problems. For a more detailed insight see:

<https://bootcamp.uxdesign.cc/systems-thinking-the-iceberg-model-6294bc5346f0>

Erel Onojobi



All three methods equipped participants with a range of **tools and frameworks with which to see familiar problems with new eyes** – a critical opportunity for practitioners to exit the space of constantly ‘doing’ in their professional lives, and to step back and reflect on the bigger picture and context of their work. As noted by one of the lead facilitators of the process, this was critical in a context where community groups and practitioners have been stripped of opportunities to think, learn and grow together over recent decades.

“ We used a yam activity – which was our adaptation of the systems change iceberg activity – to support the group to think about issues of safety. At the top of the iceberg is what you see on face value when you look at the local community; the key events that are talked about, like knife crime stabbings, black boys going to prison, and the like. And then, in the next layer of the iceberg are those things that contribute and give rise to those conditions – the patterns, the structures, and the mental models. Having that yam activity, and a range of other activities and toys, such as the Cynefin framework and the lego activity, really gave the local experts a whole new set of eyes to look through. ...And they really enjoyed having these different eyes and ways of looking at the issue; this set of different ways to unpack old, familiar, stuck problems. Just having spaces where people can be given those ways of visioning their work of seeing the potential, the possibilities of their work, I think is, was just a really good thing for them. ...it kind of facilitated their hunger to look at what they're doing with new eyes. ”

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative



The adoption of these reflective and participatory approaches were spoken of very positively by participants who commended the **strong facilitation** of the implementing partners, and shared how working together cultivated a joyful space in which they could be present and switch off from the day-to-day concerns of running their organisations.

“ Specifically I’ve enjoyed the interactive and embodied approaches to the work. It’s not just standard boring slides. It’s energising activities... preparing the group and creating a container for creative work and deep thinking which is required for effective systems change. ”

Local Expert & Participant

Aisha Khan

“...I love how there were different types of activities. Sometimes it was writing, sometimes we were modelling, sometimes we were creating things with resources. It was nice, it was almost very therapeutic... They did really well in making me present. And I committed to myself, If I'm here, I'm going to be present. So it's kind of like phone's off, be 100% there. ..It was very joyful.”

Local Expert & Participant

This included important space to engage in **reflective practice and exchange** with other participants, and an emphasis on ‘listening and learning sessions’ in which participants were encouraged to truly hear and engage with perspectives that differed from their own.

“What I found really, really, really good was the prep information and the prep guidelines [before sessions]. I think when you're told explicitly to go to this space with an open mind, without assuming that you are right, just to listen... try to leave every judgement outside the door... I think that sets you up in a completely different place. It does really, really does truly help to listen, and to understand.”

Local Expert & Participant



“I remember having the conversation with someone: Do we have to destroy the system and create something new? And I did ask him this. ... It was very interesting for me to hear him say, I don't think we should destroy the system. ...I was like, wow, this is really interesting. And he explained very thoroughly where he was coming from. It really unlocked something within myself; this sense that every journey is different, and we're all trying to figure out this really shady context. And everyone's doing the best from where we are. And everyone can figure out something differently. So there's a lot in collective power. ...For him to say, 'No, I don't think we shouldn't destroy it. I want to teach as many people as I can how to navigate the system' had a big impact on me. ...The fact that we were invited to go to these learning journeys with an open and blank page, just to listen and take in, I think that was really, really, really good.”

Local Expert & Participant

“Professionals have that space and time, and training to stop and think, and do all of that kind of flowery stuff. Whereas the practitioners are concerned with: 'How do I open my centre today? How do I close? How do I make sure we've got enough money to keep the doors open?', you know. You know? And so I think, in my heart, the questions was how do we use the social lab methodology to help practitioners to do their work? How do we help people to stop and think? To spend some time exploring what they're doing? ...In general, they don't get the space to look up and to see the world. They become practitioners, and then they just kind of get lost this tunnel of doing and making sure they've got enough funding for next year. ...Often in the opening round of workshops, you'd hear people say, 'I'm really glad to be here. Because I can stop. Because I can just engage my brain in a different way in the work that I'm doing, you know. And just that alone for people is the most repeated reflection about the lab that I heard from participants throughout the process. //”

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative

Overall, the methods were received by the vast majority of attendees as transformative – a rare but important opportunity to step back from their busy schedules and work as practitioners and leaders of organisations, and to engage in some **personal development**. Better still, becoming familiar with some of these methods and approaches to systems change had additional **benefits for their organisation**; most took back key ideas and activities and shared them with staff and colleagues in their workplaces.

In particular, several people mentioned the yam – an adaptation of the iceberg activity – which was used as a tool to encourage systems thinking. The exercise helps group members identify patterns related to a problem, the systems structures related to those patterns and the mental models that create the structures.

In addition, several others spoke about the value of the Cynefin framework for assessing and questioning problems sharing how they had applied and shared the tool with colleagues in their organisations. Key in both processes was an emphasis on agency, with each encouraging participants to recognise systemic issues, but also engage with their own capacities to influence change.

“It was a really, really excellent tool for me to look things from a different perspective, like, 'Oh, this is not your traditional problem. This is a more complicated situation. So we might need to try and fail and test and try again. And that framework given from the sessions was very useful. //”

Local Expert & Participant

Stephanie Woodrow



“ The Cynefin framework has stuck with me and I now use it in my organisation. When I do have problems at work now or we're looking at new ways of doing things. I do think about that graph, like what kind of problem is this and where does it work? ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ The emphasis in the programme of asking "What can I do? What can we do? What could we do?" was useful. Acknowledging structural factors but also looking within... I think this is something we struggle with in the women's sector. Looking at power within self and organisation. ”

Local Expert & Participant

What has been challenging about the social lab methodology...

While viewed positively overall by the end of the process, the adoption of the social lab method, including Theory U, the Cynefin framework, and the Yam (an adaptation of systems change iceberg), did provoke a number of challenges and anxieties – particularly in the early and middle stages of the project.

The open-ended and process-oriented nature of the approach was perhaps especially **jarring to practitioners who were naturally more goal-oriented**, and even some of those working at the hardest end of safety issues (e.g. around criminal justice or domestic violence issues).

“ It was quite mysterious, very mysterious, this U-process. But I assume that they've got their approach to how they facilitate. ...They're not over giving. They give you less information to hold you present in the moment, when I'm a person who wants to know all the information beforehand, so that I can think about it and then come up with something. ”

Local Expert & Participant

“ A facilitator explained that there are people that are planners and like structure. He warned us from the beginning, 'you're going to struggle in this process'. And then there are people that can flow. I am from the first group. I constantly struggled with, 'Oh, my God, where are we? What is happening? What's going to come after this? When are we going to come up with something?' For me, it has been such a journey of learning to flow. I am trying to let go of that need of structure. But I'm still struggling. ”

Local Expert & Participant

Among this latter group, which was admittedly small in number, protracted and 'time-consuming' conversations about one's personal positions and the issue of safety – and even the more participatory methods adopted in the process – were experienced as time wasted and a luxury that local experts could not afford.

“And the approach to the sessions is very much I would describe as a kind of mind, body and soul. And it's very holistic, it's very woo woo. ...And, when you live in a busy world, like mine – I mean, for the first few times, it was lovely. It was fun. ...But it did get repetitive, because it was kind of like, 'Okay, you can move this on.' But that's just me, that's just my own way. I think I'm different from others like my colleague. ...So that was interesting. Because I've never been in a space like that. **”**

Local Expert & Participant

Transition Points within the process:

A need for additional support during key transition phases in the U Process was articulated. Moving from the hands-on facilitation and what felt like a safe container in the collective exploration phase to the prototyping phase was challenging for some participants. There was a nuanced tension between participants being encouraged to trust the somewhat mysterious U Process, particularly on the left side of the process (step 1 and 2), and then being prompted to assert agency on the right side of the U Process (step 3) which felt somewhat abrupt. This highlights the need for additional resources to assist participants through a smoother transition.

“It just went kind of like 'now you guys organise yourselves, go and do what you need to do.' Whereas we've been in this nice little safety net. ...To say 'go and do what you need to do and come back to us,' It just felt a little flat. Everyone seemed a bit confused. **”**

Local Expert & Participant

Appreciating the method but questioning the coloniality of the U process...

For some, there were even deeper questions about whether the U-process was needed at all, and indeed whether its current application and attribution was itself 'colonial' and reflected coloniality of knowledge.

“I think U process is fantastic. But fundamentally I think it's just naming an innate process that makes sense; that we've been going to as human beings for for such a long time. **”**

Local Expert & Participant

// Often the source of this work is attributed to white folks. They've coined theory U... I've been trained in this work... and I've only been trained by white people. But my personal stance on all of this is that this way of working is actually a Black and brown way of working in its essence and at its core. And I would love to find better language and for it to be attributed to different sources. **//**

Facilitator

A Black-led and owned process...?

In addition to the challenges described above, a further set of questions emerged around the applicability of the U process for work within Black and racially minoritised communities. At the heart of this inquiry was a concern to understand whether the process adopted could be considered truly Black-owned, and whether it made a difference to have a Black organisation and facilitation team leading the process.

This question surfaced some important, if complicated and critical learnings and insights, including:

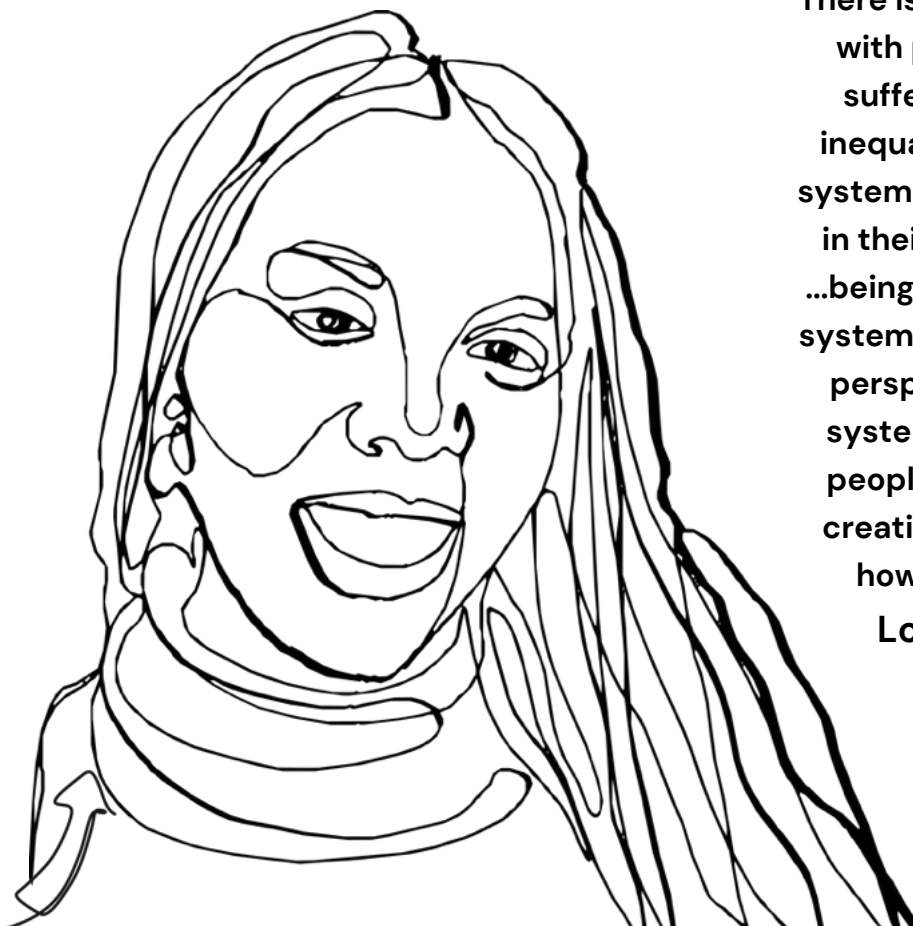
- How was the U-theory developed in the first instance?
- Who has been acknowledged in the process of developing theory?
- Who gets to own and capitalise on learning from the U process after it is applied within Black and racially minoritised communities?

The importance of Black-led and facilitated processes...

Overall, implementing partners and participants alike all agreed that having a Black-led organisation and facilitation team had not only been critical, but ultimately a rare and transformative experience for all present.

// There is something for me about working with people that suffer from racism, suffer from oppression, suffer from inequality... they often know best how systems work, because they are actually in their life experiencing how it works. ...being in learning together, around how systems change work, from that specific perspective of being oppressed by a system is different than working with people who have always been part of creating the systems and understand how systems work and all of that. **//**

Local Expert & Participant



Christina Oredoko

// What I'm learning is that it really, really, matters who you invite into the room. ...Doing this work, specifically with majority Black and brown and racially minoritised people is a fundamentally different experience. Working with Black and brown people makes a difference and changes the context. **//**

Yannick Wassmer, Senior Consultant, Reos Partners

// We are really glad to be working with a Black-led organisation who really knows how to build trust and also has deep understanding about how community organisations work, the culture that they operate from. **//**

Radhika Bynon, Portfolio Manager, Impact on Urban Health

The importance of adapting and tailoring the process...

Questions were raised, however, about the coloniality of the method, and what kinds of adaptations the process would need to work for Black and racially minoritised communities. Among the facilitation team, there was significant discussion about how to adapt a method that was adopted, initially because it was convenient to learn and important to test out.

The most important adaptations made included:

- Moving from a more individualistic to a more collectivist approach to thinking about the internal conditions of the intervenor in step one of the U-process
- Adapting activities – for example, the iceberg activity – to speak more to the experiences and cultural context of local community
- Integrating explicitly 'African' forms of movement, song and creativity into the process
- Emphasising ancestral connection and links to the continent of Africa

// We've purposefully brought song in; we've purposely brought movement; and we purposely brought African song in. So not just any song, but we've brought African songs [from across the continent] in. ...We must, when we're working with Black people, connect them back to Africa. Because I believe that to be the source of our strength. As we move forward, I don't think there can be free Black people until we have a strong Africa. And so our connection back to source is important. ...If I was taken today, and dragged off to some place, and forced to work for nothing, I would hope that when I died, my grandchildren would come back to see who I was, and where I was. There's that kind of responsibility, that I think that we have to just touch where we come from; to rest the spirits of people that went through a whole heap of shit to stay alive, so that I could be here, you know? **//**

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative



“Whenever I challenge other black activists about what is the difference between kind of Eurocentric thought and Afro centric thought, the first thing that they come back with is always this idea of collective responsibility, and collective spaces in Africa. And so I do want to explore what that means.”

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative

“Another one is believing what people say, and believing that their experience of racism is their experience of racism. And bringing my own conditions for being in relationship into the workshops means checking out all of the time that as Black people we are conscious of who we are in this space? And what is the relationship that I have to have with other Black people to be challenging, to be creative, to enable them to do their thing courageously? And the lab is an opportunity to do that.”

Michael Hamilton, Director, The Ubele Initiative

3. KEY TAKEAWAYS

Planting Seeds:

Facilitating networks, building relationships, and establishing connections are crucial prerequisites for effective systems change, even before concrete solutions are identified.

While the U process holds value, its significance lies primarily in its role as a tool for fostering connections and laying the groundwork for impactful work. It serves as a means of sowing seeds and creating a container for the transformative efforts that will unfold.

The Importance of Black-led processes:

The composition of the room holds significance; including community experts and individuals with lived experiences is essential.

Equally crucial is who is facilitating and holding the process; individuals with lived experience. And finally who is on boarded as a learning partner really matters; individuals with lived experience.

These spaces represent rare opportunities where the focus extends beyond addressing singular issues, such as safety, to encompass broader objectives like sowing seeds, facilitating connections, community power, agency, and networks and relationships that will exist and generate returns beyond the life-cycle of a single project. Ultimately, it's about cultivating fertile ground for Black-led systems change initiatives to tackle issues rooted in generations of systemic injustice.

