

APRIL 2022

# BLACK COMMUNITIES WORKING GROUP ON WELLBEING & SAFETY

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

INTERIM REPORT OF AFRICAN  
FRANCOPHONE IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY  
STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS APRIL 2022

Facilitators:

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- Alphonse Ahola Ndem, Executive Director, Francophonie Albertaine Plurielle (FRAP)

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## INTRODUCTION

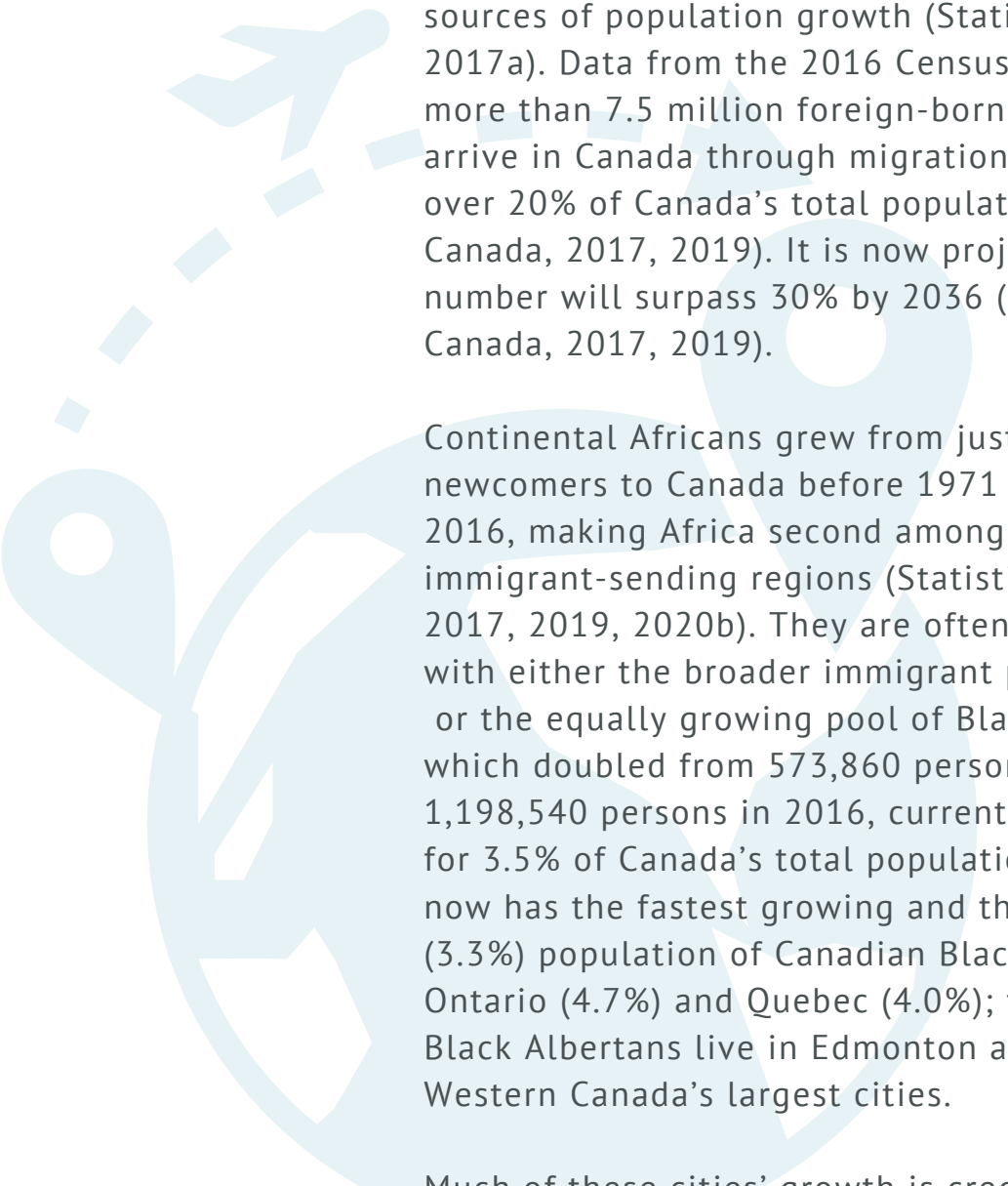
This report is based on two loosely structured focus group discussions held on Feb. 26th and March 12th, 2022, respectively. The main objectives of the work were to:

- 1) present research findings on the challenges faced by the different communities;**
- 2) examine these findings in light of stakeholders' experiences and insights and;**
- 3) explore the strengths these communities bring to the challenges identified as well as the weaknesses that could undermine their efforts to thrive.**

A total of 12-14 participants attended each discussion, including community leaders, religious leaders and service providers, many of which are professionals in specific fields of these endeavours. This report captures what the community gatherings accomplished light of three objectives: 1) Dr. Philomina Okeke's presentation of current knowledge on African immigrants and the larger Black population, including relevant findings from her research program and research findings; 2) Responses to the presentation in both the first and second focus group discussions; 3) The communal capacity to address the identified challenges.

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## BACKGROUND



Migration has long been one of Canada's primary sources of population growth (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Data from the 2016 Census reveal that more than 7.5 million foreign-born individuals arrive in Canada through migration, representing over 20% of Canada's total population (Statistics Canada, 2017, 2019). It is now projected that this number will surpass 30% by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2017, 2019).

Continental Africans grew from just 1.9% of newcomers to Canada before 1971 to 13% in 2016, making Africa second among Canada's immigrant-sending regions (Statistics Canada 2017, 2019, 2020b). They are often lumped in with either the broader immigrant population or the equally growing pool of Black Canadians, which doubled from 573,860 persons in 1996 to 1,198,540 persons in 2016, currently accounting for 3.5% of Canada's total population. Alberta now has the fastest growing and the third largest (3.3%) population of Canadian Blacks, following Ontario (4.7%) and Quebec (4.0%); the majority of Black Albertans live in Edmonton and Calgary, Western Canada's largest cities.

Much of these cities' growth is credited to African newcomers. The majority of these newcomers are skilled workers that are more highly educated than the average Canadian (Statistics Canada 2016, 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

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## BACKGROUND (CONT'D)

Unfortunately, African immigrants, upon arrival, face a barrage of unanticipated challenges. Though the empirical evidence on this population is sparse, what it reveals is very telling; the diverse communities within wrestle with the pressures of immigration and settlement, notably: under/unemployment, economic instability, mental ill-health, poor training and educational outcomes, and intimate partner violence, as well as challenges with parenting, relationships with service providers, and ties to relatives in their countries of origin. These findings point to patterns of systemic inequities rooted in anti-Black racism, shifting gender relations, loss of community, struggles with individual development, and living in survival mode. For Africans at home and abroad, a significant source of well-being lies in the strength of community. However, for immigrants, community ties are challenged as they rebuild and restructure their lives in Canada.

Uncoordinated efforts to manage these challenges inadvertently further marginalize these communities. Thus, in taking any steps towards addressing these issues, it is crucial to defer to the lived experiences of those affected to provide intentional direction and guidance. This begins with community discussions to set the path for the way forward.



## BACKGROUND (CONT'D 2)

Two focus groups were completed on Feb. 26th and March 12th, 2022, consisting of academic and community stakeholders of African descent who have been identified as leaders or elders within their communities. Focus groups took place online via Zoom teleconferencing and were conducted in English and French. Except for three individuals, all the participants are French speakers.


The first focus group aimed to identify factors contributing to the loss of community within Black populations in Canada.

The second focus group built on this, emphasizing issues for consideration in developing strategies towards rebuilding these communities.

This narrative summary provides highlights of these focus groups and reveals key areas of concern for Black community leaders and organizations across Canada. Issues related to accessibility, professional integration, social and cultural isolation, minority statuses, and shifting identity were identified in the focus group discussions.

A systematic analysis is currently underway which will expand on this preliminary report.

## PRELIMINARY THEME #1: BARRIERS TO ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES



“This poses a problem since the older generations, compared to the youth, may have accumulated greater mental problems.”

Across the focus groups, participants reported issues with the accessibility and availability of services and supports and several participants specifically identified language discordance as a significant and ongoing challenge within their communities. Despite English and French being the two official languages in Canada, French-speaking participants reported that accessing healthcare providers from similar cultural backgrounds who were also French-speaking was challenging as such healthcare providers were scarce. This was echoed by another participant who emphasized language barriers to access within the Haitian community, where immigrants may not speak English or French and are therefore often left out of the conversation on issues relating to language barriers within Black immigrant communities.



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Participants also shared that some topics (e.g., mental health and domestic violence) were seen as taboo in their communities, which meant that they were not discussed, and as a result, concerns in these areas were dismissed or went unacknowledged. Additionally, it was shared by another participant that for those who wanted to seek services in these “taboo” areas, service professionals who would provide such services in their language were also scarce.

A participant drew particular attention to the lack of mental health resources for French speakers, especially senior adults. This poses a problem since the older generations, compared to the youth, may have accumulated greater mental problems. There is a crucial need for an adequate and culturally appropriate support system for more recent immigrants from the global south like Africans. However, the language barrier, especially in English provinces such as Alberta, creates even more challenges for French speaking immigrants.

For instance, the lack of French-speaking therapists is something that Black-African Francophone communities wrestle with in Alberta. Further, there may be a need for collective therapy among Africans, a participant suggested; experiences could differ across generations, participants explain, but many of challenges faced often amount to widely shared communal struggles.



Overall, participants highlighted the urgency for more research on African and Caribbean immigrants in Canada to identify their specific needs. It was emphasized that this scarcity in knowledge contributes to a corresponding scarcity of services appropriately catering to these populations.

## **PRELIMINARY THEME #2: CHALLENGES WITH PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION**

Across all focus groups, participants discussed challenges with professional integration post-migration. Participants shared that despite a majority of African and Caribbean immigrants arriving as skilled workers, many resorted to working in unskilled roles and unpleasant circumstances due to the lack of recognition of their degrees, certifications, or professional experiences by Canadian employers. Several participants discussed the topic of employers requiring Canadian experience, which disqualified many immigrants from roles they were otherwise eligible for.



## 09



Along this vein, one participant shared that many in their community attempted to return to school to enable them to acquire positions in their respective fields. Another participant added that even after completing additional education, poor understanding and familiarity with the various systems in Canada made it difficult for immigrants to find appropriate employment. In turn, many are overeducated and unemployed or underemployed.

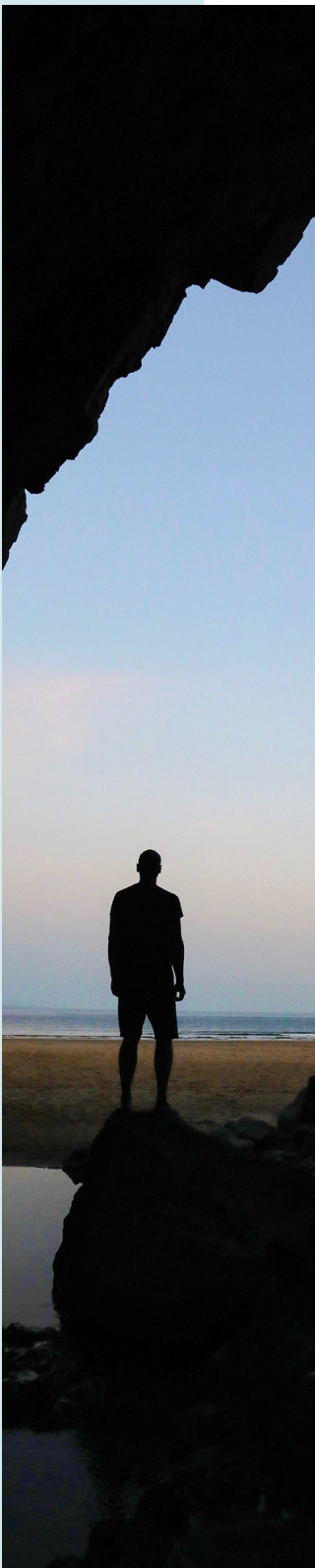
The focus group discussion also waded into a crucial insight that their community members reported: they were not aware of the realities of life in Canada. Community complaints along this line are continual and many people say it is better to back home. Upon arrival, many could not cope with the deluge of challenges from family life to making a living. According to the participants, many community members felt upon arrival, possibly due to the lack of employment opportunities, that coming to Canada was a mistake. Despite being very educated, older immigrants notice how their qualifications were considered below Canadian standards. A good number of participants noted that this could be quite upsetting, especially for immigrants with higher education credentials. Some of the participants argued that Canadian authorities project false impressions of a “good life” to attract newcomers only to leave them, upon arrival, feeling deceived and deflated. On a similar note, newcomers to Canada have limited information and social support familiarize themselves with life in Canada.

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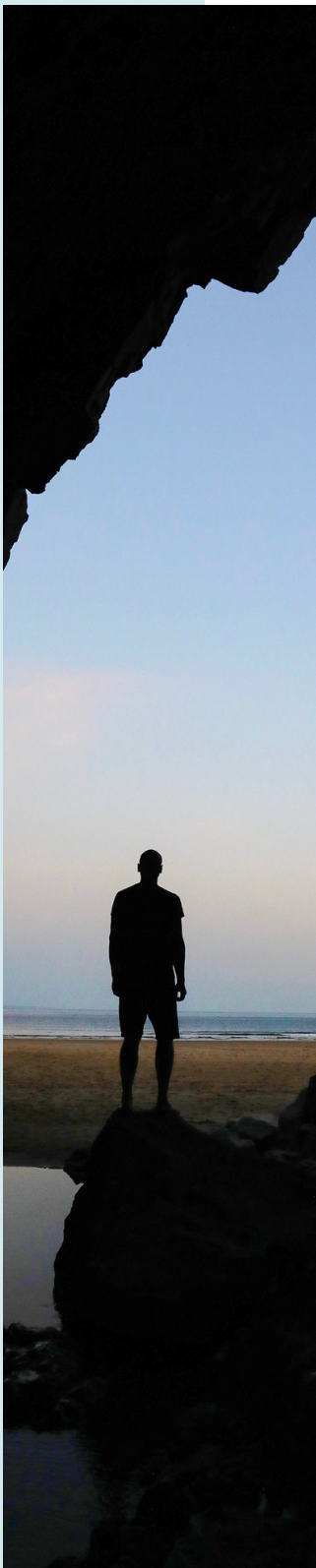
Moreover, job loss can be very stressful to community members because many of them support extended family in their countries of origin. In the view of participants, community members are simply disappointed with the Canadian government's inaction; deep down, they explained, these newcomers know that life could be better in Canada and simply want a "bridge" to that better life. Participants were of the view that best way to address this gap would be to create information packages for African immigrants before they arrive in Canada.

## PRELIMINARY THEME #3: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ISOLATION

Participants discussed stories of social and cultural isolation within their communities. One participant shared that issues in this area were not only an outcome of being an immigrant in a culturally dissimilar country but also due to many immigrants' internal struggle with the choice to leave their homes. Another participant added that for some immigrants, their strong attachments to their home country coupled with few ties in their host country made acculturation and resettlement more difficult.



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It was also shared that some immigrants are made to feel like hypocrites for leaving their home country, creating tension between them and their family back home. Participants shared concern for how separation from extended family and village may contribute to feelings of isolation in children and youth. Another participant added to that, stating that the lack of role models in the Black Canadian community was detrimental to child and youth outcomes, and contributed to poor decision-making such as dropping out of school and joining gangs. One participant noted that in their community, the sense of isolation was simply due to the small size of their broader community within Canada, emphasizing feelings of constantly searching for a place within Canada's Black community. There are also very few role models to act as mentors.

According to the participants, Black immigrants experience a loss of identity and a lack of self-awareness upon their arrival to Canada. Many appear to be caught between their home countries and Canada. This split identity makes them lack a sense of belonging in their communities here in Canada. For instance, Canadian gender roles may challenge an African immigrant couples' previously established traditional norms. For example, participants explained, a woman who assumed more domestic responsibilities back home could question this division of labour in the Canadian context. Similarly, the male partner may be reluctant to take on additional domestic duties here in Canada.

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In situations where a female spouse has greater opportunities and successes, the male spouse might feel threatened. These are possible scenarios that could create serious tension between spouses. This tension could easily escalate to situations that lead to marital separation or divorce.

## PRELIMINARY THEME #4: MINORITIES WITHIN MINORITIES

Several participants highlighted the need for careful consideration of the demographics of Black immigrants in Canada. Though Black immigrants have some shared experiences due to anti-Black racism and the challenges of immigration to a culturally dissimilar country, subsets of this population face intensified difficulties due to compounded minority status. One participant noted that, despite the similarities in the experiences of African and Caribbean communities in the post-migration context, Haitian immigrants are underrepresented within Canada's Black population and tend to be unacknowledged when immigrant-serving programs and services are being developed.





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They highlighted that Haitian immigrants may not speak English or French, which leads to specific language barriers even within the broader Black immigrant community, of which many are French-speaking.

Another participant noted that Muslim immigrants, particularly Muslim women, are an extremely underserved population that would benefit from increased support, especially considering the ongoing targeted violence towards Black and Brown Muslim women grounded in anti-Black racism.

These participants jointly emphasized that in going unacknowledged, these subpopulations within Black immigrant communities are further marginalized, placing them at increased risk for poor social wellbeing. Haitians, for instance, may feel like they are underrepresented in the notion of Black people because they do not see themselves as Africans.

Some of the groups among Africans immigrants, participants posit, may have higher educational credentials.

The difficulties with interaction with African immigrants, language barriers and the instances of poor educational credentials, could further isolate Haitians.



## PRELIMINARY THEME #5: IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

“*This was especially a concern for children who, in post-migration context, are less attuned to their cultural heritage...*”

Several participants discussed both loss of identity within their communities and a loss of community itself. It was shared that, in Canada, African and Caribbean immigrants suddenly find themselves navigating the social experience of being perceived as Black (and a minority), whereas in their countries of origin, they were not identified by their race, but by where they came from or the language they spoke. In Canada, being lumped together as Black despite the very diverse origins of African and Caribbean immigrants contributed to the willful erasure of their identity. One participant added that this was especially a concern for children who, in the post-migration context, are less attuned to their cultural heritage and may identify as African or Black, but do not share the same close ties to home or their culture as their parents.





Participants called for recognition of the diversity of the Black immigrant population in Canada.

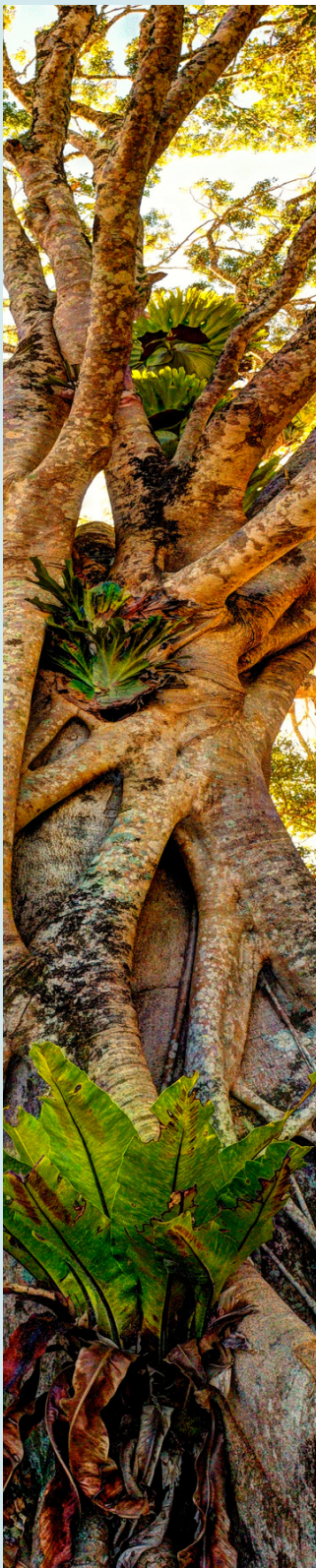
## STRENGTHS IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

In the second focus group, participants were divided into two break-out sessions to reflect upon the issues they raised. They were asked to provide their insights to two main questions:

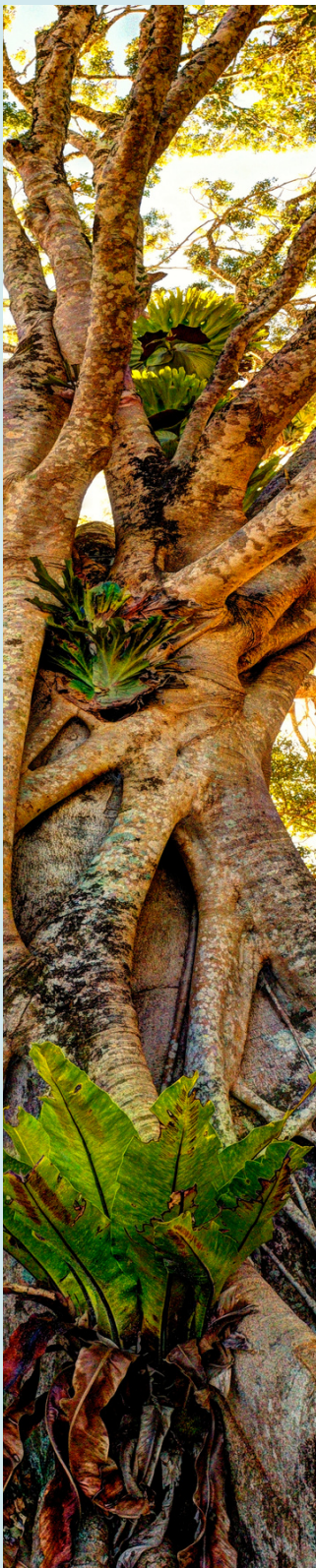
- 1) What factors could undermine the Black community' capacities to enhance the lives of its members, particularly continental Africans?**
- 2) What strengths does the community bring to the challenges its members face?**

As the report outlined above, the participants spent more time identifying, analyzing and reiterating the challenges the Black community faces, the gaps or weak links across their community - particularly the unique circumstances of French speaking continental Africans immigrants.

While the break-out sessions were not recorded, each group appointed a spokesperson to provide a summary of their discussions.



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- In Africa, people rely heavily on their families for psychological support; this is a great strength that has not only been carried into the new homeland but could be nurtured in various ways to serve the Diaspora.
- African Canadians are increasingly entering the world of politics and other forums of leadership. They could play an important role in supporting their community members and groups.
- Africans in Canada constitute a young and very motivated demographic, when compared to mainstream Canadians.
- Africans are not only very hard workers, but have been exposed to trying situations that equip them with remarkable resilience.
- Immigrant communities have great intergenerational connections; this is a cultural tradition which they must not lose sight of.
- The new generation of Africans in Canada are highly educated and this allows them to be very adaptable.
- **Hope** is an integral facet of African life. Africans' abilities to navigate and negotiate difficult circumstances in their lives stem from the various ways they practice and exercise hope in everyday life.

## CONCLUSION

Across the focus groups, participants highlighted factors that contribute to the experiences of African and Caribbean immigrants in Canada. Systemic issues such as anti-Black racism, discrimination, and employment practices rooted in imperialism hinder the successful integration and resettlement of Black immigrants. While the strength of many African and Caribbean immigrants lie in their community, community is reconceptualized in the transnational context, and for some, the community they seek in Canada is not the same wholesome community from which they uprooted their lives. There have been numerous focus groups and discussions within the Black immigrant community over the years, yet little action has emerged from these gatherings. In the meantime, communities weaken and dissolve. As such, there is an urgent need to move forward with intention, but steps should be taken with care and attention to the various strengths and barriers of Canada's African and Caribbean immigrant communities.

Finally, the participants were very emphatic about where they are going with this initiative; they do not want another set of focus groups that ends nowhere. They pointed out that the course of action that should be taken following these discussions should not dwell unduly on the struggles the Black community faces. Rather, a greater focus should be placed on bringing **meaningful** solutions to the table.



## REFERENCES

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