

INTERVIEW

Opportunity for Us to do Better

Dahabo Ahmed Omer became the inaugural executive director of the BlackNorth Initiative last fall.

Founded by the Canadian Council of Business Leaders Against Anti-Black Systemic Racism, BlackNorth challenges senior Canadian business leaders to commit their companies to specific actions and targets designed to end anti-Black systemic racism and create opportunities for members of the Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) community.

Prior to her work with BlackNorth, Ahmed Omer was a well-known policy advisor and human rights advocate. She sits on the Federation of Black Canadians board of directors, co-founded the Justice for Abdirahman Coalition, and was director of operations for the Somali Centre for Family Services. In 2019, Ahmed Omer was named one of the 100 most influential people of African descent under age 40, an international award in support of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent.

What big questions should leaders in the charitable sector ask themselves now?

I think one of the most important questions that leaders need to ask themselves is what are they individually doing.

When we look at sustainable change, we really need to look at individual

behaviour – at how our individual behaviours all feed into the overall behaviour when it comes to the discrimination, anti-Black racism, prejudices, and unconscious bias that we deal with.

It's really important for leaders to first ask themselves, "What am I doing to change the conversation? What am I doing to uplift? What am I doing to empower? What am I doing to change? What is it that I'm individually doing?" Once we all start to ask ourselves the individual questions – the personal one-on-one questions – we'll start to see the big impacts across the board.

It's a hard conversation to have with oneself. It's hard to ask yourself, 'Am I part of the problem? Is there something that I am doing that's perpetuating this?' I think that the answer to that question, generally, will always be 'yes'. If the answer was no across the board, then we would not be having these conversations. I think it's important for leaders to be humble and to be self-conscious. Self-awareness is a gift.

What challenges does COVID-19 recovery present? What about opportunities?

COVID-19 makes it so difficult for us generally to ignore any of the problems. Everything is heightened. Everything is on the surface. It's a wound that's open and fresh. It's in your face, and it makes you very, very uncomfortable.

It's also something that we're globally



Dahabo Ahmed Omer, executive director of BlackNorth Initiative

sharing. It's not something that you're individually (or your own family) going through. It's literally something that's shared across the board.

I think more than anything, the biggest challenges are very much in the health sector, very much in the housing sector, very much in the economic sector. How are we ensuring that people have jobs and can provide for themselves and their families? How do we make sure that people who already had a lack of access to healthcare can now gain some sort of support to assist in this massive pandemic?

It's an uncomfortable place to be, to know that these challenges are in your face and there's no way to ignore them. They were there before. It's not like COVID is racist, because it isn't, but the impact of it is very discriminatory.

All of the challenges that we see now were there for a very long time. COVID has just brought them to the surface so that you can't turn your head away.

I hope that we can turn this into a positive change-maker in the world – something that allows us to connect in a way that we've never been able to before.

I think that the world is showing us the ugly side of the universe, putting up a mirror to all of us and asking, "What are you going to do? Look at what's happening to your people, to humanity generally." I think there's a lot of opportunity for us to do better.

How has the sector had to adapt and change in the context of COVID-19?

The [charitable] sector is the one that's most in tune with communities' needs. They're the ones who are on the ground. They're the ones who are face-to-face with communities and have a line of sight that's a lot clearer than the federal government's. I wholeheartedly believe the federal government should be supporting the charitable sector a lot more than they have been.

There has to be a mechanism that allows the federal government to say to themselves, 'These are the groups that are in direct contact with those we are trying to serve.'

You hear a lot [from] the marginalized communities [telling] you that they don't trust the government, don't go to their community centre, don't go to a foundation. They're looking at this sector as a way out, to sustain themselves: "That's your mandate, what you do. You're there to help me."

It's important for the public sector to start to look at the charitable sector as a partner, as arm-in-arm, shoulder-to-shoulder. What is it that your community needs, and what can we give you? And not do this thing where we need to assess and bureaucratize processes, because [the delays] just impact someone's potential life-or-death situation.

I think we have to be very agile, and the government needs to be able to be right there with the charitable sector. [The sector] can point to where the needs are. We've seen emergency measures put in place [in] 24 hours. The capacity is there. It's not magical – clearly it's possible – and therefore, what is it that can be done

more? In order for us to get to the light at the end of the tunnel, the federal government needs to create more partnerships with the charitable sector and look specifically at parts of the sector that are supporting Black communities, Indigenous communities, people of colour and people with disabilities.

What should the relationship between the sector and the federal government look like in the context of COVID-19 recovery?

We talk about this within BlackNorth: having a system that actually speaks to a three-way partnership between the corporate sector, the public sector, and the charitable sector.

Right now it's done very much ad hoc. If there was a mechanism that allows these three entities to actually work hand-in-hand, can you imagine the amount of help that would go towards our communities? It's the whole "working in silos" effect. It doesn't help anyone. All it does is hurt people and delay things.

We've seen it before when a multitude of sectors come together, the impact that they have. COVID has taught us a very costly and valuable lesson: not to be alone.

If we can build a system, or some sort of partnership, that would allow the public sector – whether it be federal, provincial, or municipal – to partner with the corporate and charitable sectors, I think we would do wonders in our communities. Imagine all those assets coming into one place. You can't lose that way.

Name a problem in the sector that everyone knows about but no one

wants to tackle. Why?

I wholeheartedly believe that there are some organizations that get a lot more, just because of their brand name, and don't have actual impact, don't create a dent, and don't make changes the way that they need to be making changes.

We don't talk about it, and I think we should talk about it, but it's an uncomfortable conversation. There are some big-name foundations out there that are world-renowned and nationally known. But if you go into communities, they don't know them. They've never heard of them. They've never been there.

What [the community] knows is their own local non-profits or charities that are actually reaching out and helping them.

It's like the bully in the classroom. Nobody wants to confront him. Nobody wants to say anything about the big man or the big group. There's fear that comes with it. There are potential ramifications that come from it.

When you're a smaller charitable organization, you don't necessarily want to go and play with the big dogs because you're not really sure how you're going to come out of that. But it is a reality that there are more grassroots charities that are doing way more work than the big-name [foundations].

Kim Hart Macneill is a Halifax-based freelance editor and journalist.

This interview was originally published in The Philanthropist Journal in February 2021. You can view it and other articles at <https://thephilanthropist.ca/>

This interview has been edited.