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# Let's Talk More About Racial Issues

By **Yusef Ben-Meir**  
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What was revealed about President Barack Obama's outlook on racial issues as he dealt with the controversy over the arrest of Harvard University Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.? Interestingly, the principal view shown by the president was also highlighted by his attorney general in a controversial speech he gave last February commemorating African American History Month.

After making unintentional remarks about the arrest of Gates in his home by Sgt. James Crowley of the Cambridge police, Obama extended an invitation to the gentlemen for a beer at the White House — a positive gathering that occurred on July 30. The idea it seems behind the invitation is that direct communication between parties involved in a conflict (Gates and Crowley) and a skilled third-party facilitator (here, the President of the United States) can advance mutual

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understanding among the participants.

Attorney General Eric Holder also underscored the dialogue theme in his noted speech about race. He said that "we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about race," and that "we must feel comfortable enough with one another, and tolerant enough of each other, to have frank conversations about the racial matters that continue to divide us." Participatory communication to which Holder seems to refer is an internationally applied methodology that builds more productive racial-ethnic relations through inclusive direct dialogue. The process begins with groups building trust, leading to expressions of regret. Racial dialogue and reconciliation at the local level can gradually become vehicles for participants to collaboratively plan and implement their priority socio-economic and environmental initiatives.

Holder's comment that received great (negative) attention — that we are "essentially a nation of cowards" — was directed at the reality that we as a nation commonly avoid inter-personal and -group dialogue on issues of race. People may not have the opportunity to participate in discussions about race, but also they may not want to in order to not feel the discomfort that can go along with conversing about how race can determine opportunities in life, for example.

From these two incidences involving the president and the attorney general, what can we learn about how the Obama administration might approach crux issues such as an apology from the federal government for slavery, affirmative action and reparations, and institutional racism (in the criminal justice system, the economy, health and education) creating disproportionate levels of poverty and incarceration among African Americans particularly?

Foremost, Obama's policies may significantly grow from inter-racial "listening" — or racial dialogue across U.S. communities. In fact, policies and programs that create constructive local dialogue about racial and ethnic experiences and partnership could be viewed by the administration as an end in itself.

This approach to managing racial issues embodies the president's bottom-up philosophy, and could unfold in society in the following way. Understanding and relationships among racial and ethnic groups are built during inclusive local dialogue. Then, coalitions form and local racial movements composed of diverse groups spread horizontally — from one group to another and from one community to another through peers, its demonstration effect and the ongoing training and work of facilitators. The local movements then partner and have an

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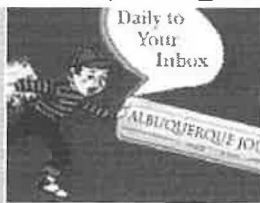
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effect on state and national laws and policies.

For this to happen, dialogue at the community level needs to be catalyzed, facilitated and sustained. What kinds of programs spur on these local bottom-up processes? To start, the U.S. Department of Education could dedicate funding to compiling existing and creating new participatory dialogue activities that provide some structure to maximize information sharing, and build trust and partnership.

People, particularly those in a position to apply them, need to be trained in facilitating community-dialogue.

The emerging position of Obama on race does not seem as much focused on end solutions to our most challenging problems, but rather more on the process of how sustainable solutions may be found. Under Obama, then, race-related programs and policies would not be directed toward pre-determined ends, but rather reflect the consensus position derived from countless community conversations. The end for Obama, then, which utilizes magnificently his skills and identity, is to build the means by which people can come together and talk.

*Yosef Ben-Meir is president of the High Atlas Foundation, a nongovernment organization founded by former Peace Corps volunteers and dedicated to community development in Morocco. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of New Mexico (2009), and recently joined the faculty at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco. The views in this article reflect the author's.*

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