



# Wildfires & Youth: Nature vs Nurture

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In collaboration with:



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# About the author

Dr. Abdul Haqq Baker is the founder and Managing Director of the 2009 award winning youth initiative, Strategy To Reach Empower & Educate Teenagers (STREET) UK, a former Lecturer in Terrorism Studies at the Centre of Studies in Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) in the University of St Andrews and Research Fellow for the University of Exeter's European Muslim Research Centre. He was also chairman of Brixton Mosque, London between 1994 and 2009 where he successfully countered external extremist threats to the local Muslim community and successfully challenged the destructive propaganda that accompanied it.

His strategic focus involves intervention frameworks that enable strategic community based and statutory collaborations/partnerships to address the multifaceted challenges faced by violent extremism and environments at risk of developing them. His STREET programme was subsequently cited by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and British think- tank DEMOS, among others, as a model case study. Its effective approach towards youth engagement and intervention led to it winning the Preventing Violent Extremism Innovation award (17th February 2009) for the most innovative youth programme in 2008.

Abdul Haqq's insight, experiences and expertise in successfully challenging violent radicalisation has led to him being widely acknowledged as an authority on violent extremism and counter-radicalisation in the UK as well as an expert in the field of youth intervention projects. He has acted in the capacity of adviser and on occasion, expert witness regarding international terrorism cases.



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# Introduction

Climate change continues to be cited as the underlying reason behind increasingly frequent wildfires occurring across the globe. Media reports often highlight the devastating impact of nature's raging infernos on wildlife and local communities, leaving little to nothing in their paths:

**"Authorities in the Russian Far East declared a state of emergency on Monday as summer wildfires spread amid intense heat and lightning storms.**

**The head of the Republic of Sakha...wrote on the Telegram messaging app that more than 110 forest fires were raging across about 61,000 hectares (151,000 acres), roughly three-quarters the size of New York City." (1)**

Closer to home, many learned of similar fates resulting in the obliteration of hundreds of hectares:

**"Hundreds of firefighters are steadily wrestling under control France's first major forest fire of the year, which has ripped through swaths of woods and scrub straddling the country's southern border with Spain." (2)**

Despite meteorological forecasts and predictions etc., tackling these and other forces of nature remains challenging. Technology and Science cannot suffice as a substitute for genuine human endeavour. In view of our inability (and in some quarters, unwillingness) to reverse or indeed, implement effective strategies to mitigate the harm we have collectively caused to the planet (3), confronting more immediate challenges appear futile.





# Stoking the Embers of Discontent: France Riots, 2023

The recent killing of 17-year-old Nahel M. in France can be, to some extent, considered a George Floyd (US, 2021) and Mark Duggan (UK, 2011) moment due to the riots and violence that ensued as a result of police brutality – yet again. More than 5 nights of rioting have witnessed major cities like Paris, Marseille and Strasbourg on fire and, as many have now become accustomed to, blame is squarely attributed to the youth. The elephant in the room is ignored:

**“Nahel’s death was the third fatal shooting by police during traffic stops in France in 2023, and the 21st since 2020. Most of the victims have been of black or north African origin.” (4)**

Even the office of the UN high commissioner for human rights (OHCHR) has waded in, criticising French policing and stating:

**“...the shooting was a “moment for the country to seriously address the deep issues of racism and racial discrimination in law enforcement”.**

The above comments resemble similar sentiments that echo across a number of European societies where systemic racism forms the basis of the state and its associated statutory agencies. However, instead of citing further examples, alongside supporting evidence of these institutionalised strategies that serve to ensure marginalised communities remain at the lowest strata of society, it is important to acknowledge they exist. This is difficult for political and statutory authorities that remain adamant in their assertion that racism is absent from government, the police and other institutions, contrary to empirical evidence that highlights this fact.



# Burying heads in the sand: UK, 2023

Returning from across the Channel to UK homeland, the tepid responses to the occurrences in France reflect the inertia surrounding a government that has long run out of ideas:

**“The culture secretary has said she is “worried” about the ongoing riots in France as unrest elsewhere “sometimes feeds through into this country”.**

**Lucy Frazer made the admission as she announced £3 million in funding for youth organisations to offer additional opportunities for young people through the summer holidays to reduce antisocial behaviour... She said the government is taking action to ensure there are “positive things for young people to do”.**

**“We’ve put in significant funds in order to stop young people going down the wrong path,” she said...” (6)**

When contrasting the above mentioned £3 million with the 73% funding cuts (amounting to £958.72 million) in less than a decade, the government’s disinterest in youth development is undeniable. We need to therefore explore and consider alternative avenues of empowerment, education and development for the younger generations if society is to navigate away from the flames of civil discord previously witnessed in Britain (Brixton, Toxteth, 1981 and Brixton, Broadwater Farm Tottenham, 1985 and Tottenham/across UK cities, 2011):

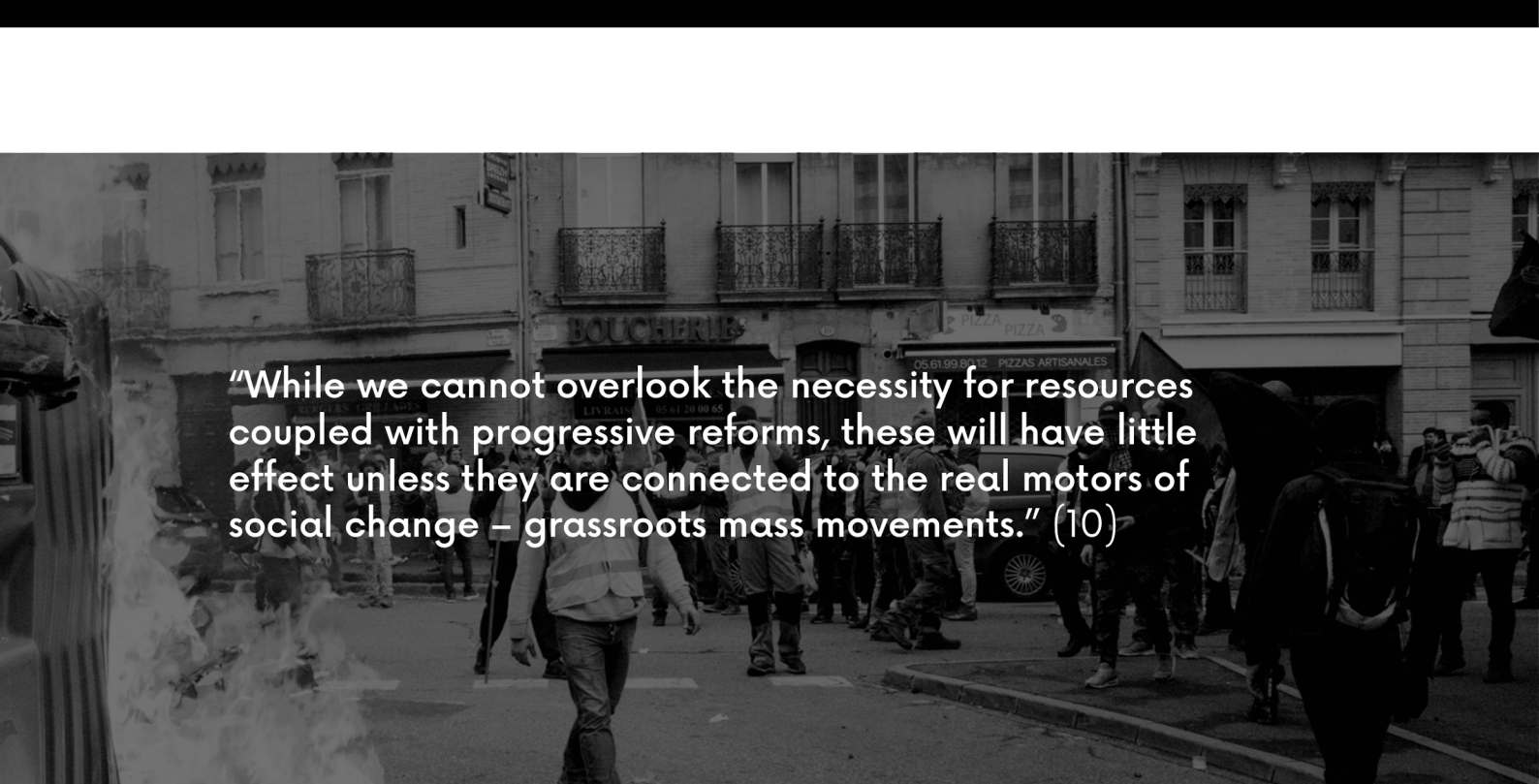
**“Riots are the culmination of...underlying issues. They might be catalyzed by one particular cause – such as a police shooting – but they’re also the result of long-held angers – broader police abuse, residential segregation, economic inequality, and racial tensions... What’s more, riots can lead to serious attention and change.” (8).**

## Local Partnership & Investment: An Alternative to the Carrot and Stick

**“Targeted funding denudes radical Black politics of its commitment to solidarity... Today, this has left different communities to compete over resources limited by the state and market capitalism. At its most crass, communities are encouraged to argue over who is most marginalised or most privileged, in order to justify who should be platformed, financed or centred.” (9)**

In my last article, I referred to a concept devised to redefine particular social factors that have influenced societies and communities on macro and microcosmic levels respectively. The socio-economic, cultural, political and religious contexts can operate both nationally and internationally within a Triangular Identity Nexus, interconnecting disparate communities previously separated by Triangular Slave Trade Routes. These socio-ecosystems will form the basis of business development at national and international levels, providing infrastructures for local education, development and investment.

Youth have myriad obstacles and challenges today. As it relates to the future, new employment prospects are yet to be imagined. Therefore, it is important to equip them with interpersonal abilities and aptitudes to adapt, develop and navigate changes they will invariably face. Education – not only academic – is essential if they are to contribute towards a societal cohesion and solidarity that is fast eroding today as a result of individualism.



**“While we cannot overlook the necessity for resources coupled with progressive reforms, these will have little effect unless they are connected to the real motors of social change – grassroots mass movements.” (10)**

Social financiers continue to play an integral role among local communities and have supported some significant projects that have made a real difference to the lives of this society's marginalised. Having said this, there is a requirement to counterbalance funding initiatives with investment, thereby affording start-up ventures and businesses the opportunity to become self-sustainable. Reshaping elements of business strategies to fit paradigms more suited to the nuances of these new entities is likely to facilitate growth within the ecosystems and nexus referred to above. For example, forward, backward and horizontal integration strategies could be adapted in the following manner:

**1. Forward Integration strategy involves gaining ownership or increased control over distributors or retailers.'**

Adaptation of this strategy within the above mentioned context and framework would involve shifting focus on new and/or existing enterprises and supporting their expansion into new competitive markets as opposed to acquiring ownership etc.

**2. 'Backward Integration is a strategy of seeking ownership or increased control of a firm's suppliers.'**

This particular approach can be adapted from an educational perspective, capitalising on community potential and investing in student development throughout the educational process or at least contributing to specific areas, i.e. GCSE, A Levels, vocational or undergraduate studies. Apprenticeships provide similar pathways at undergraduate levels.

**3. 'Horizontal Integration is a strategy of seeking ownership of or increased control over a firm's competitors.'**

In contrast to the corporate approach to this particular strategy, partnerships and collaborations with competitors focused on similar community development objectives would be established.



# Conclusion

**“There has been a collective trauma...”**

The above words were uttered by Patrick Davet, mayor of La Teste-de-Buch, France as thousands of inhabitants prepared to evacuate their homes in anticipation of wildfires that had, a year ago, decimated 30,000 hectares of forest surrounding their neighbourhoods. Juxtapose this particular community's anxieties with those experiencing inherited, intergenerational trauma as a result of being subjected to years of institutionalised racism, subsequent fear and possibility of death at the hands of state legislated agents (police in particular). Each context has its own validity but the latter must surely be more pertinent insofar as it relates to equitable rights of treatment. Failure to confront the type of systemic racism that facilitates the marginalisation of minorities will inevitably keep the fire burning and it will not be out of love, but rage.



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