

MORE THAN MEASUREMENT: ASSESSING QUALITY THROUGH REFLECTION IN FAITH BASED SOCIAL ACTION

Executive Summary

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ARTICULATING FAITH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

Articulating what faiths do in civil society is crucial if they are to be understood, valued and make a contribution to civil society. The impetus to 'measure' for this reason is well established. But measurement is usually associated with simple, static, numerical descriptions of outputs or impacts. This constrains an understanding of what faiths do to simply showing a moment or proving value to key audiences such as funders or policy-makers.

In contrast, our starting point is that measurement can be much more than this. It is capable of enabling organisations to assess their work reflectively and continuously, in a cycle of change and development. We report here on a process to test this out in faith-based settings. We implemented a mainstream quality assessment tool called **VISIBLE** (operated by Community Matters) in seven faith-based settings and reflected on the process to ask two key questions:

1. Do faith-based settings use reflection when assessing their action?
2. Do mainstream tools articulate value in faith-based settings or are new, distinctive tools required?

The aim of the project is to ensure that an effective quality standard tool is available to faith-based settings by establishing what elements of an existing mainstream tool work, and making adaptations if necessary.

Seven projects participated from across four faith traditions and a multi-faith group. They are located in the North West, Midlands, London and South West. They have a variety of organisational structures and management: some are charities, and some used the process to prepare for charitable status. Between them they offer a range of community support and all are intergenerational. All except the multi-faith one are located in faith buildings.

The process was overseen by a programme manager employed by FbRN, to whom the projects had constant access. Each also had a mentor provided by FbRN as well as access to Community Matters resources.

VISIBLE was chosen as the pilot tool because it is a quality standard framework designed for small local community groups, such as faith-based projects. It holds authentic accreditation recognised widely within and beyond the sector; its founding body, Community Matters, was keen to test the standard in faith contexts.

MEASUREMENT AS REFLECTION

Reflective practice is a common model in social action but using measurement to achieve it is not. We found that, in faith-based settings, tools for assessing quality are valued most when they are also used to reflect. This requires a tool which is sufficiently flexible to allow participants to determine their own indicators of value, at their own pace, and for their own clearly articulated purposes, while remaining within the parameters of the mainstream accreditation process.

Faith communities are spaces of solidarity and inter-relationship, not simply organisational structures. Participants said that reflection on faith-based social action must take place in these contexts. They noted an important difference between measuring an organisation and measuring the activities of a faith community. Many measurement tools miss this by focusing on organisational performance.

Participants said faith-based social action is marked out by a disposition towards wisdom drawn from the faith tradition and attentive hospitality; factors which they think aid a reflective nature and an expectation of individual and organisational transformation. In this way, they connect faith directly to service. Reflection upon that faith is regarded as essential to renewing effective service, though publicly expressing it may not be.

Participants said that a quality standard is valuable for: articulating values, re-connecting with passion, affirming commitment, promoting openness and transparency, encouraging participatory leadership, building professionalism, improving quality, and surfacing tensions and barriers, and resolving them. The study found that the main reason why faith-based organisations undertake a quality assurance process is to seek organisational development and the improvement of services in a process of reflective practice.

VALUES

The projects emphasise measurement which captures the values underlying their work. They are satisfied with a tool which enables them to reconnect with underpinning values. They also want a tool to connect those values to their expression in practice. They do not require a tool which expressly articulates religious values in public ways.

PASSION

Measurement is capable of re-igniting passion when it is conducted reflectively. In some cases it generates new passions. In either case it is valued in faith-based settings for connecting to a deep commitment underpinning social action.

The connected community will be one in which passion is distributed throughout. The passion of a faith-based organisation cannot be separated out from the relationships, identity and solidarity of the faith community. Measurement-as-reflection has the potential to achieve this since it seeks to involve people widely and deeply, rather than being a tick-box exercise carried out by one person.

All of the participants in this study said that they felt it wrong to evangelise through their social action. Services must be 'without strings'. But they also said that their passion for social action has its source in their faith and that this could be helpfully brought out by the quality assessment tool.

COMMITMENT

Commitment to the organisation and its services is important. Volunteers, staff and trustees said they are highly committed to faith-based social action. They were more committed to the measurement-as-reflection process than to achieving a quality mark. Commitment to the process results in development and change. Participants said that undertaking the process helped them to build commitment to the work, to the organisation, and to continuous reflective measurement. The more they did it, the more they saw its value.

REASONS FOR MEASURING QUALITY

We asked: Why did your organisation decide to undertake a quality management system? Least prioritised was 'to gain the quality mark'. Responses suggest that measurement is seen as a process of reflection, aimed at providing the best service to users.

When asked to rate: Who is quality demonstrated to? those associated with governance emphasise policy makers and funders. Volunteers and staff saw the priority as being service users.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Participants valued measurements which include the extent to which an organisation offers its services and activities to all, the experience of welcome and hospitality, and the open way it conducts business.

Expressing religious reasons for faith-based social action can be a helpful aspect of 'being accountable' since it spells out why a service is being offered, and what it might feel like to use the service. Conversely, a lack of clarity about what motivates faith groups can be a cause of tension when external funders and partners are already wary or sceptical of working with them.

MEASUREMENT TENSIONS

The study found that an organisation may experience tensions between its mission, aims and values, and the requirements of external bodies.

Two contrasting tensions were revealed: one between the impetus to measure, which can be distracting, and the impetus to act which is regarded as the primary goal; another between measurement for organisational development and measurement undertaken to 'chase funding'.

What was valued about the tool used was its ability to enable faith-based organisations to reveal areas of tension and to work through and resolve them where possible.

LEADERSHIP

Participants distinguished between leadership on processes and leadership on values. They valued leadership which integrated the two. They also distinguished between leadership styles and leadership structures.

The projects in this study operate organic styles rather than hierarchical structures. They have leaders who exercise facilitative approaches, who act as ambassadors, who draw out passion in staff and who are prepared to take risks to encourage the participation of others. This relies on community development skills and facilitative approaches as much as on being entrepreneurial.

This contrasts with a leadership style that relies upon an authoritarian or charismatic personality or entrepreneur. The challenge is to synthesise 'relational community' with an enterprising spirit.

This is a relevant point in a policy context for civil society which emphasises entrepreneurship and social enterprise emerging from a competitive culture. Conversely, participants' working style was collaborative, and empowering. VISIBLE helped them to sharpen their focus on maintaining these approaches which are important to sustaining the relationships from which their social action springs.

THE ROLE OF MENTORSHIP

Each project had a mentor skilled in faith-based community development. Projects and mentors concluded that mentorship introduces a chain of action which is essential to the 'measurement-as-reflection' process:

- mentorship is a key part of the investment, entailing a relationship with a person in addition to a commitment to the measurement process
- mentors 'join the community' rather than providing it with consultancy. They hold the context and the tasks supportively
- the 'learning disposition' is underpinned by this relationship through discussion and supervision with a person who acts as an independent 'eye'
- mentoring leads to identifying, sharing and disseminating knowledge and understanding
- support by a mentor helps people in the projects develop a 'thinking head'
- some of the projects in this study may have considered giving up without mentorship.

PROFESSIONALISM

The mentoring relationship is also part of humanising the measurement process, 'warming it up' and setting the 'professional' in the context of relationships.

Faith-based social action is not always seen as professional. The projects themselves were nevertheless highly professional in their governance and services. A tool which enables projects to assess professionalism is important as measurement can increase professionalism as well as demonstrate it.

Some participants noted the difference between becoming a more professional organisation and 'professionalisation' through which the project could become overly-formal. They felt this could strip an organisation of its warmth and hospitality.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Faith-based social action can be effectively assessed using mainstream tools. This indicates that faith-based projects can operate as part of, not separate from, the wider voluntary and community sector.
 2. Mainstream tools are effective in faith-based settings when they:
 - allow participants to determine aspects of what to measure, as well as assessing core domains such as regulatory compliance
 - require distributed involvement in the process throughout the organisation
 - involve reflection on both existing practices and the development of new ones.
 3. The main driver for faith-based social action projects to undertake a quality tool is the learning process itself rather than the goal of a quality mark. Learning brings about genuine change and development.
 4. Faith-based social action projects value the measurement process because it gains them credibility with the wider community as well as enabling them to develop through continuous reflection. Those associated with governance in faith-based settings emphasise measurement as a way of demonstrating quality to policy makers and funders. Volunteers and staff prioritise measurement as a means of improving quality for service users. It is important to involve service users in measurement processes.
 5. An organisation has to commit resources to the process if it is to be of deep benefit. This investment produces a return for the organisation and for civil society. However faith-based social action projects are unable or unwilling to pay to undertake a quality standard.
 6. Measurement takes time. The process requires a culture of organisational learning rooted in:
 - the relationships in the communities from which services come
 - a designated lead worker to champion the quality tool
 - the support of a mentor who engages with the community and the tasks.
 7. Faith-based social action settings do not usually wish to evangelise. Their aim is to serve in practical ways. Measurement can help articulate the faith underlying the social action which can be important for ensuring the work is understood. It can also defuse concerns about evangelisation by spelling out what is being provided, for whom and with what reasons.
 8. Faith-based social action is marked out by an attentiveness and disposition towards wisdom and hospitality – factors which practitioners think aid a reflective nature, a human-scale and an expectation of transformation and quality improvements. They value a measurement approach which captures and articulates this.
 9. Faith-based social action flourishes in the context of facilitative styles of leadership which emphasise:
 - inclusiveness, participation and empowerment
 - the elements of strong relationships and well-connected communities.
- A quality standard (such as VISIBLE) rooted in community development principles will best suit local faith-based social action projects.

The full report can be found at:
www.fbrn.org.uk and www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit

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