

Briefing Paper 137

Belief in Social Action: Exploring faith groups' responses to local needs

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Background

Over recent years there has been growing political and media interest in faith based organisations (FBOs) and the role they play in what is sometimes assumed to be a predominantly secular society in the UK. Successive New Labour administrations placed a strong emphasis on the role of FBOs as facilitators of social integration and community cohesion, and at the same time events of 9/11 in the US and 7/7 in the UK saw the prevention of violent extremism become a key focus of the government's engagement with Muslim communities in particular.

The financial crisis of 2008 and the introduction of austerity measures, including welfare reform, under the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments, have contributed to increasing interest in FBOs' role in responding to social needs at a local level.

Much recent literature on faith based social action has focused on the 'demand side': the way in which changing social needs draw out responses from faith groups; the growth of food banks under austerity being a case in point. However, there is also a 'supply-side' dimension to faith based social engagement: changes in theology, practice, size, confidence, resources and capacity of different faith groups over time influence the

nature and extent of their involvement in local communities. Furthermore, there are ways in which faith communities resist, subvert and campaign against government policy: as Jamoul and Wills point out: 'faith organisations are a potentially powerful political resource in the contemporary city...[but theirs] is not an engagement that buys wholesale into the mainstream political and economic agenda' (2008, p. 2056).

Aims of the Study

The role of FBOs in local communities and in wider society is complex and contested, and has become more so in a context of increasing religious diversity. However, much debate on this subject fails to capture the nuanced and varied meanings and motivations attached to faith based social action, as well as issues of changing capacity, resourcing and focus. The current study sought to address some of the gaps in the existing literature and empirical evidence base, in order to arrive at a more accurate picture of faith communities' social engagement in the context of austerity and of local religious and ethnic diversity.

Research Methods

A multi-level methodology was used, involving different geographical scales and perspectives. This included:

1) Interviews with 13 local religious leaders and activists in faith groups at a **local community/post code level**. These were conducted in the fifth most deprived neighbourhood in the city studied. This area has a population of approximately 31,000 of which 88% are from Black and Minority Ethnic or 'not born in the UK' groups. Two thirds of the population is Muslim, 21% is Christian and 5% is Hindu.

2) 17 Interviews at **city/regional level** and **national level** with participants in multi-faith forums, as well as regional/national organisations that corresponded with the groups/denominations active at a local level. Representatives came from four major faiths.

3) Three interviews were undertaken with **academics** conducting research into faith based social action and inter-faith relations.

In addition, two workshops were convened to enable practitioners to engage with, and further contribute to the findings. The first had 17 participants from Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Christian faith groups. The second recruited a wider audience of 30 representatives from both secular and faith based organisations.

Key Debates

The literature review identified key debates in the existing research around the themes of: faith groups' role as service providers, and in building cohesion and social capital; inter-faith and multi-faith working; and extremism and counter-terrorism in relation to faith. The issues raised include:

- tensions around campaigning for social justice whilst also acting as delivery partners with government
- the potential for FBOs to be used as a cheap way of providing welfare services, excusing or facilitating the withdrawal of statutory 'safety nets'
- a lack of religious literacy and understanding in the public sphere
- that faith communities can build bonding and bridging social capital, but can also hinder relationships between groups by being inwardly focussed

- a mismatch between policy makers' utilitarian/ economic approach and the values underpinning faith based work
- the variety of forms of inter-faith activity (dialogue, relationship building, addressing community issues together), but also the limited reach of this, associated with resource constraints and differing priorities
- the growing prominence of the prevention of violent extremism in social policy, particularly with regard to Islam, including the potentially detrimental impacts of this on Muslim communities and cohesion.

Discussion: Five Faithful Statements

Five 'faithful statements' were derived from the interview data. These are not generalised from all responses but are intentionally polemical, in order to stimulate further debate and reflection.

Statement 1: Any rational debate about the role of faith groups has been hijacked by Islamophobia, 'Trojan horse', the prevention of violent extremism agenda and an aggressive secularism

The starting point for discussions on faith based social action, both in individual interviews and in focus groups, was the identification of motivations or values and, to a limited extent, their theological basis. Some similarities were identified between Christian concepts of charity or good works, Sewa in Sikhism (service/being welcomed in) and Masaleh in Islam (being beneficial).

"The concept of service is deeply engrained but now it goes beyond the Gurdwara." (Sikh academic)

Another respondent commented that:

"... being a Muslim it's my duty and my faith saying that I must work for reward from my creator, my God, my Allah, that he's given me everything, you know, he's given me life, he's given me health... So I like to do something for humanity." (Local Mosque interview)

Explanations of social engagement differed, however, and many interviewees explained

their involvement in relation to the sacred texts, stories, central figures or teachings of their specific faith, for example:

“Jesus told this story about people who just walked past, but then somebody who stayed and helped, and it didn’t have to be an important person who stayed and helped, it was just somebody who was willing to not be bothered about the religion or the race of the person who was wounded... so I suppose that says something about why we are here, we are here because we are following Jesus Christ.” (Local Christian interview)

Internal views about motivations for social action were sometimes accompanied by frustration about understandings of religion in wider society. Some felt that it was perceived as monolithic rather than heterogeneous. There were concerns that a pervasive secularism held religious belief to be irrational or incompatible with liberal society.

Statement 2: The state has withdrawn. The voluntary organisations left when the money ran out. Faith groups are all that is left here

A consistent theme in local interviews, and across faith groups, was the withdrawal of state welfare provision:

“A lot of the libraries around here are closing down, a lot of the advice and information centres are closing down, the neighbourhood offices are closing down, you know, so there’s a range of services that traditionally the local authority provided which they are no longer, so we clearly see where the gaps and the needs are and we will try and help fill those.” (Hindu Temple interview)

“In some areas faith buildings are the only thing left and there is a lot of work happening in those places but it’s hidden and uncelebrated.” (City wide inter-faith forum)

In the area studied, voluntary organisations that had been reliant on monies from Area Based Initiatives had closed or withdrawn local services due to funding having ended. Perhaps as a result, demand for assistance from local

faith groups had increased, and the nature of the help requested was changing:

“What we’re seeing the need for now is advice, assistance and advocacy where people need help filling out forms, benefits, assistance generally, and also accessing the free food that we offer. We’ve certainly seen a big increase in people coming here for food and we do get people coming in asking for money as well.” (Hindu Temple interview)

Faith groups were seen as responding to gaps opened up by a shrinking and increasingly punitive state welfare system.

Statement 3: We are working with the most vulnerable people at a time when there is increasing public hostility to welfare

Faith groups’ concern for the most vulnerable in society was a consistent theme in interviews. In the area studied, this included work with destitute migrants and refugees, asylum seekers, adults with mental health, drug, or alcohol problems, homeless people and those living in, or on the edge of, poverty.

Needs were rarely identified by systematic research, but rather through presence:

“On a weekly basis we have different people knocking on our doors saying: ‘Can you help us, we don’t have food’ ... it is a new need that community members are presenting to us.” (Christian Methodist interview)

“Well we know what the needs are of our community because they come in and tell us and we deal with their queries on a day to day basis, so we’re very confident in our own particular Ravidassia community, about their needs.” (Ravidassia Temple interview).

Some felt that concern for marginalised groups contributed to unity of purpose across faith groups, citing food poverty as an example. There was pessimism, however, about the potential for political influence:

“The political climate is not conducive to making changes around social justice. There is a real democratic deficit which is growing. People have a sense of the inability to influence

political processes.” (National Christian umbrella organisation)

Statement 4: We are administering the new poor laws for the 21st century... without the resources

It was noted that faith groups’ commitment to local communities and marginalised people could be exploited by policy makers, especially in a context of austerity. Many interviewees felt that faith groups were being left to ‘pick up the pieces’ in the wake of welfare reform. There was resistance to the idea that FBOs could, or should, administer the ‘new poor laws’. In many cases human and financial resources were very stretched, and faith groups themselves were not untroubled by socio-economic challenges:

“It’s getting harder for people to volunteer, particularly with welfare reform. People can’t almost afford the time to be not looking for jobs in what is a difficult climate now.... Some people I can think of that used to volunteer have said no I can’t, I’ve got to go and do training or whatever.” (Christian inter-denominational initiative)

Statement 5: Inter faith works... when you do/do not leave God at the door?

For some interviewees involved in inter-denominational and multi-faith forums, ‘leaving God at the door’ did not make sense:

“Inter-faith work does not work when you leave God at the door. That defeats the point of coming together. It’s about creating space to work out what our differences are and what we have in common.” (Regional Multi-faith Forum)

Others sought to avoid identifying differences between religions, arguing that:

“Explicit theological language does not help in working in diverse communities” (National Christian Umbrella body).

There was some agreement that the most fruitful inter-faith work was often where people of different faiths actively tackled a shared concern together. However, personal relationships between people of different faiths were seen by some as having intrinsic value, which became particularly important at times of potential or actual tension or tragedy.

“It’s an interesting time for inter faith organisations. The formal ones are falling away. Some were only held together by money and have disappeared altogether. So what seems to be thriving is more informal [work] around specific issues – rather than religion talking to religion on faith issues.” (National Inter-denominational Forum)

Conclusions

In the area studied, different faith groups were very active in terms of welfare provision (e.g. food and clothing) and other services (e.g. youth provision), mitigating some of the worst effects of poverty as far as they were able to with the resources they had. Yet across faith groups, concerns were expressed about capacity to respond to increasing levels of need in a sustainable way. Locally, there was rarely scope to divert resources or even thinking towards structural issues contributing to the needs faith groups were responding to. Regional and national organisations were more engaged in this, but not without significant opposition, both in the form of poor religious literacy in the public sphere, and a questioning of the legitimacy of faith groups’ place in campaigning about issues of political and economic injustice.



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