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***Government support for faith-based organizations: the case
of a development programme for faith leaders***

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Abstract:

This study of a government initiative to train faith leaders found it had made a useful start but that it will require continuing policy support for some years. Some of the challenges involved underline precisely the reasons why such initiatives are needed.

“We will introduce a development programme for faith leaders. A pilot begins this year. This will be open to leaders of all beliefs, and will help them get a better grasp of the leadership and communication skills they need to engage with the community.” Ruth Kelly MP, Secretary for Communities, 5th April 2007

Why might governments want the leaders of faith communities to take on a broader community leadership role, or to exercise it more prominently? The presumed standing and moral authority of religious leaders means they have long been seen as influencing socialisation and identity formation (often through programmes for children and young people), and as opinion formers on the social and political issues of the day. More particularly, in deprived areas few other institutions and leaders able to speak for the community may remain (ACUPA 1986). The potential of faith leaders in strengthening community cohesion, especially in the context of inter-faith collaboration, is another possibility (DCLG 2007a; Harris and Young, 2009). In addition, working in and through places of worship may provide an opportunity to engage with ‘hard-to-reach’ communities on issues of concern to public bodies - for example, health promotion (see, eg, Peterson et al, 2002).

In the case of the minister’s announcement quoted above, strengthening the community leadership contribution of faith leaders was part of an action plan that drew directly on the findings of a series of Muslim working parties. Along with the development programme for faith leaders, it contained many other initiatives to strengthen and support faith-based organizations, especially those in the Muslim community².

Nevertheless, it was controversial. The ‘*Winning hearts and minds*’ action plan (DCLG 2007b) was part of the PREVENT (counter-terrorism) agenda galvanised by the 7/7 London bombings of 2005. Some community groups in areas with high Muslim populations, including established bodies like the Young Foundation, refused to take advantage of the opportunities funded under the PREVENT agenda³. This may have reflected fears that the schemes would be a means of interference, control and surveillance of Muslim organizations, or simply been a protest against other aspects of the PREVENT agenda and the rhetoric surrounding it⁴.

² They included publication of a good practice guide to encourage Muslim women to play a greater role in FBOs; funding for local forums to counter extremism and Islamophobia, and funding for resources on citizenship suitable for use in supplementary schools and madrasas (DCLG, 2007b).

³ The Director of the Young Foundation, *pers. com.*

⁴ For a discussion of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ counter-terrorism strategies and how they were perceived in Muslim communities see Spalek *et al*, 2009

The severe practical difficulties facing these initiatives – indeed, whether they were really feasible – attracted much less attention. But as one leading authority on Muslim communities in Britain put it: “Such proposals presupposed the professionalization of Muslim religious leaders...” (Lewis, 2007). As he points out, the extent and quality of the religious training of the *ulema*⁵ is very uneven and their social standing quite “modest” (pp 274-5). He goes on to quote scathing comments about the beliefs, motivations, capabilities and conduct of many Imams not just from a series of prominent British Muslims but also from Muslim websites. His own views are more complex, but as the title of his valuable article makes plain, the prospects for imams, *ulema* and Sufis providing ‘bridging social capital’ (Putnam, 2001) to any significant extent are uncertain. Crucially, most imams, and the mosque committees that employ them, do not see the role as having a civic dimension.

Nevertheless, within a few months of this announcement, leading adult educators had been contracted to prepare and pilot the development programme referred to by the minister. Shortly afterwards, the authors were commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the programme, and their remit was soon extended to include mapping the existing and potential market for training to support faith-based organizations. This gave them the opportunity both to trace the enactment of one strand of the policy, and to locate it in a broader third sector context.

This paper reports on what happened, drawing on the evaluation of the pilot programme for its empirical basis⁶. It then goes beyond it to consider what this case suggests about some of the wider concerns and debates surrounding public policy in relation to the third sector and faith-based organizations in particular.

The development and piloting of the training course

Drawing on the proposals of the Muslim working parties brought together by the government in the immediate aftermath of 7/7 and other discussions, civil servants at the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) invited the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) to set out a proposal for a course that would provide continuing professional development (CPD) to faith leaders and workers. The overall aim of the programme was ‘to develop the communication, negotiation, representation and other skills of faith leaders and workers so that they can operate more effectively and confidently within their own communities and British society’. The other requirements were that appropriate learning materials be developed for use on the course; that the course be accredited against a recognised qualification; and that the course should be trialled in 5 pilot localities with up to 25 participants in each, from September/October 2007 to March 2008. By the summer of 2007 a contract with NIACE had been agreed and the course objectives and main topic areas⁷ had been agreed. The intention was that after the pilots the programme would be ‘rolled out’ across the country.

⁵ The term refers to Muslim scholars, as trained by traditional Islamic seminaries (or madrasas).

⁶ This is available as Paton *et al*, 2009 where more detail of the methods used as well as summaries of the evidence gathered are available.

⁷ Legal (government policy / legislation / regulation & compliance); organisational and governance (including finance); community development; diversity & faith; leadership & team working; communication and PR; community cohesion / conflict resolution.

From the start governance of the project was complex. DIUS was the lead department but Communities and local Government were joint owners and involved in the project management. NIACE had its own management structure, which included the recruitment of three consultants to run the five pilots, which were individually managed by 'key contacts' in each of the pilot localities. NIACE set up an Advisory Board, which brought together representatives of all major faiths. This group raised questions and concerns about some of the course objectives and how they were expressed as learning outcomes (why were Muslims being given particular attention?). This led to some revisions and provided useful ongoing advice.

The timescale was extremely tight: less than a year between Ministerial announcement and completion of the pilots. This precluded developing a new qualification. NIACE therefore devised a new course but turned to the Open College Network (OCN) for assistance on aligning it with appropriate units from an existing general qualification (an Award for Progression, Level 1). They would use the experience of the pilots to prepare and seek approval for a new qualification in time for subsequent cohorts. Development of the participant and trainer handbooks; recruitment of three national consultants and five 'key contacts' in the expected pilot areas; and tutor recruitment with the necessary subject expertise from a diverse range of backgrounds proceeded more or less in parallel.

A major staging post was the national briefing workshop, held in Sheffield in October 2007, involving NIACE and OCN staff, consultants, key contacts, (some) trainer applicants, some potential participants and others. This usefully surfaced a number of important concerns (marketing to the original timescale; confusion about the nature of accreditation and its relevance; the complex arrangements for delivery). Following the workshop, NIACE decided to have pairs of tutors for each presentation (one with subject expertise and the other with accreditation expertise), and that tutor training sessions were required (these took place in November and early December). At about this time, too, it was decided to stop referring to the programme as CPD – because this was clearly inappropriate for a course carrying accreditation at Level 1.

The course was marketed primarily by leaflets and word of mouth through the 'key contacts' existing networks, especially local interfaith groups. Even the more extensive of these networks were partial, and tended not to reflect the groups originally envisaged for this project. The original focus on 'leaders' might have implied that the course was aimed at those in more established roles. In the event, volunteers and those who held positions exercising informal leadership were also encouraged to enrol. Still, target numbers were not achieved in any of the pilots and the Liverpool pilot did not run at all. Participants recruited came from a mix of religious backgrounds, with a majority of Muslims, both genders, and a spread in the age-range. Educational backgrounds ranged from those who had no formal qualifications to those who had doctorates. Most of the participants were supported by their faith group in doing the course.

The pilots in Leicester and Bradford started at the end of October, Sheffield followed in November 2007 and Tower Hamlets in January 2008. Based on interviews, observation and simple surveys undertaken at the start and end of the pilot runs, it is clear that once underway, the courses went quite well. Some participants dropped out (but no more than might be expected in part-time adult education). But the classes

‘gelled’, the tutors were appreciated and many found all the sessions useful (with the exception of finance, clearly a minority interest). The most valued topics were Leadership, Diversity and Faith, and Community Development. The legislative context was clearly an eye-opener to many, particularly the legislation on children and young people. Just over half the participants submitted their portfolios; all were successful. As pilots, those involved noted ways that future runs could be improved (such as making some topics optional, or changing the sequence). But perhaps the greatest learning for the course providers and sponsors concerned the very disparate needs, interests and educational backgrounds of those in the faith and inter-faith communities for whom the course was intended.

The market in training for faith leaders and workers

As the programme was being developed, it became clear that much more needed to be known about the nature and extent of existing provision, and the use that was being made of it. DIUS therefore asked for a ‘market mapping’ exercise to be undertaken.

The demand side: awareness of need and of provision

Information was sought through telephone interviews with Imams, and with Sikh, Hindu and Christian leaders⁸ (as these were considered the faith communities most likely to have a significant presence in deprived communities). *Not one* of the fifteen Imams interviewed said that they were aware of *any* programmes or courses in community leadership offered to Imams (and these interviewees tended to be based in the larger, established mosques). Almost all the Imams mentioned the need for English classes as a prerequisite (limited skill in English seemed also to be an issue for those officiating at Hindu and Sikh worship). All the Imams said that they would be happy to attend such courses – but the majority also said that their high workload left very little time for other activities. They suggested the management committees of mosques would have to be persuaded to free Imams to attend training.

A similar picture emerged from the Sikh and Hindu priests interviewed. Little if any community leadership training was available within these faith communities, and awareness of this kind of training from other sources was low. However, when asked about training needs, some of these respondents made suggestions – referring to organisational development, community development, intercultural and inter-faith relationships, communication, volunteer management and funding. This somewhat greater awareness may be because these groups are beginning to provide services (eg, for older people), and because the elected committee members responsible for Sikh *Gurdwaras* are mostly professionals.

The degree to which Christian ministers receive training relevant to community leadership was highly variable, with many receiving none at all. They did tend to be more aware of the need (particularly if they were involved in wider community issues and projects, or inter-cultural or inter-faith initiatives) and sometimes also of the opportunities. Nevertheless, many did not see themselves as part of the voluntary sector and were unaware of the available training and support.

⁸ The training providers views on faith leaders’ and workers’ awareness of need and provision confirmed the picture that emerged from the direct interviewing.

The supply side: what provision is already available?

More than 85 individuals and agencies involved in community-based training and capacity-building were contacted. The aim was to discover the nature and reach of their provision, and whether and how far it covered the topics in the NIACE programme. As expected, a very wide spectrum of training and learning opportunities, and capacity-building support, was found to be available to faith leaders. It ranges from small, bespoke capacity-building interventions to the accredited courses of colleges and universities and includes:

- single-faith leadership training / capacity building programmes featuring at least some aspect of community leadership in their content
- multi-faith-based programmes focusing on conflict resolution / community cohesion
- signposting/brokerage to relevant training opportunities, both faith-specific and generic;
- internet-based programmes both accredited and non-accredited
- programmes run by non-faith-based voluntary organizations but actively targeting faith communities and addressing faith issues

Most of the provision is ‘informal’ (i.e. non-accredited), often subject-specific (rather than part of a comprehensive course), and often tailored to a particular agency or group of agencies. Much of it is provided by second tier (infrastructure) voluntary or faith sector organisations. Most programmes are imbued with “bottom-up” community development values and so are responsive to clients with content determined by the needs of the particular group.

Overall, the training courses available to faith leaders and workers cover all the main skills sets and topic areas envisaged in the original project objectives; these are pitched at a variety of levels and with access to accreditation in at least some geographical and topic areas. *However*, programmes that explicitly address all the subject areas in the NIACE project were not found, perhaps because the project objectives address a wide range of skills. More generally, conflict resolution / community cohesion, specific training for young people and women are areas of apparent under-provision. Other relatively under-provided areas appear to be community development, faith diversity and communications / PR.

The gulf in the market

Overall, the picture was clear: actual and potential supply of a wide range of relevant training was available, but demand, for the most part, remained latent. In varying degrees, faith-based organizations saw themselves, and were seen, as different and apart from other VCOs. This does not mean that faith groups necessarily need faith-specific programmes – though for some this may be very important. The major issue, is how to make effective connections - in order to facilitate take-up (and if necessary, evolve new offerings). Such connections require dialogue and involvement – they will not be achieved simply by supplier activism aimed at persuading faith leaders and workers to respond. That is, faith leaders do not just need to be told that a particular course would help them. Very often they first need to be convinced that community engagement is part of their remit within their faith group – traditionally, this may not be part of the role. Then they need to understand how it is that a programme may be a

worthwhile investment of time. And of course, *who* provides such information will be crucial.

So brokerage and outreach needs to be informed by the cultural specificities of the community in question and by an appreciation of the typical routes to development that faith groups follow. Often, for example, the path to competence and capacity starts with the decision to address needs among their members, or to deal with a particular issue in the local community. This becomes a formative project. Soon the group realises it needs advice, information or funds – and it has to engage with others to obtain these. Of course, members usually prefer to turn to faith-specific bodies or at least those known to be faith-friendly. But the needs of the project mean members gradually become engaged with wider support networks. Through these, those involved in the embryonic faith organization become aware of and then start to access training to assist in handling the different aspects of the project. It is no accident therefore that the majority of current training provision is in the form or context of customised, ongoing capacity-building support (whether for individuals, groups or projects). This is where community groups start; it is their introduction to training and development from which leading members will often quickly progress to other forms.

Overall, therefore, analysis of the existing market indicates that embedding the new courses and qualifications will be challenging. Sustained social marketing (Hastings, 2007), rather than simple course promotion, will be required. If the costs of this activity have to be borne by providers alone this will discourage them from entering the market: such activity represents a substantial additional cost for programmes whose viability would in any case be uncertain. Moreover, even if a provider does take this risk, they may not have the range of community connections needed to work effectively as ‘trusted brokers’.

The performance of the initiative

So was it a success - and how are such initiatives to be judged, anyway? Inevitably, the results of the pilot project can be interpreted in different ways, as the following contrasting paragraphs show.

A clear success? Despite a challengingly tight timescale, the pilot met most of its objectives and provided a solid basis for further development of the initiative. Over fifty learners from a diverse set of backgrounds were involved in piloting the programme with a majority reporting their satisfaction with the experience; and 30 receiving a Level 1 qualification for their portfolio submission. When asked about the most valuable single thing gained from their participation, one group commented in unison on the development of a value base: the coming together of people from different faiths and backgrounds, with the development of friendships and nascent partnerships, *eg*, ‘looking to commence a project working with Imams across the district’. Others mentioned skills acquisition (e.g. understanding how to make funding applications; presenting better reports; another commented: ‘learning how SMART objectives work really inspired me; helped me organise myself better and do what I want to achieve, especially with youngsters’) and others that they gained more confidence with the legislation. A comment that sums it up was ‘comradeship, greater understanding and knowledge’ – on the face of it, a good basis for ongoing community cohesion. Moreover, drawing on the experience of the pilots, a Level 1

and Level 2 NOCN qualifications in Faith Community Development (Award and Certificate at each level) have now been approved. NIACE also developed a core group of trainers, some 'training the trainers' material, and a website for learners. It has set up an Advisory Board. All these are useful resources for the future.

A confused initiative and missed opportunity? The initiative was so rushed it scarcely drew on existing VCO provision and expertise and did little to develop new connections into the Muslim community. Its target market was poorly thought-through - *vide* the original conception of the course as 'CPD', while pursuing accreditation at Level 1 (equivalent to low grade GCEs). Very few Muslim 'faith leaders', as originally envisaged, enrolled. Some faith workers did participate, but key contacts commented that the people attending were those already likely to engage outside their own faith community, and that more insular groups were not reached. Being well resourced, the course was free and participants' travel expenses were paid and this helped ensure that it did not fail. But the programme was meant to be rolled out across the country and to become self-sustaining in due course. The key to sustainability (and impact) lay in building a constituency that would regularly generate viable cohorts. In other words, the central issues concerned programme marketing rather than content. The pilots exposed these, but barely began to address them.

The evident truth in these opposing accounts suggests that to appraise the project against its initial broad goals means being either arbitrary (whether *for* or *against*) or blandly balanced. Such appraisals would also be static, viewing the initiative as pre-set by its initial formulation. Alternatively, it can be seen as *intelligent improvisation* - through a learning process of doing and dialogue within an evolving network of interested parties. Faced with an urgent need to address deep-seated and poorly understood social divisions, ministers had to act, and civil servants had to find ways of enacting their pronouncements. The initiative in question was framed using ideas in good currency (leadership, CPD), informed by suggestions garnered from within Muslim communities, and implemented through an established lead body in adult education - who in turn constructed the course using pre-existing frameworks, practices and professional networks. Nothing else was realistic in the time available. But none of this was done inflexibly - NIACE adjusted their usual approach (eg, by introducing a second tutor to each group) just as the DIUS civil servants were prepared to reconsider the original plan (dropping the CPD idea, reviewing course objectives) and quickly saw that by extending the remit of the evaluation they could learn more about the prospects and contexts for embedding the new courses and qualifications. In the light of all this, they saw that it would be premature to think in terms of a 'national roll-out' in a sustainable way, and a second, more targeted, round of pilots was commissioned⁹.

An unfinished story

The longer-term impact of the new course and qualifications depends on whether this area of work continues to receive attention and financial support. Drawing partly on

⁹ These focused on Women, Young people and Chaplains, again with a particular emphasis on Muslim communities. Responsibility for these had passed from DIUS to DCLG; at the time of writing an evaluation of these was due shortly.

previous experience of capacity-building by governments¹⁰, five suggestions for how this might be done are given in the Box below. While central government has an important role in promoting such efforts, it is equally clear that progress will be made through locally devised arrangements built on and extending the capabilities of existing networks and ‘bridging’ individuals.

Conclusions: new context, familiar issues

The events of 7/7 galvanised policy-making in relation to the Muslim community in the UK. Arguably, it opened a policy window (Kingdon, 1995) – affording greater attention and significance to a range of other faith and inter-faith initiatives (see, eg, NOMS, 2007; DCLG 2007a) as well as stimulating the *Winning hearts and minds* agenda. The mixed response to the government’s proposals provides a particularly stark instance of the distrustful ambivalence that members of grass-roots organizations and social movements often feel when the powerful and privileged come bearing gifts, or invite them into the policy tent (Craig and Taylor, 2004).

Ways of encouraging the take-up of development opportunities.

1. *Trusted brokers.* One way to bridge the current gulf between faith communities and appropriate training, is by identifying and supporting those who can engage with specific faith groups and introduce them to whatever sources of support can best provide their next step forward.
2. *Financial support.* If a market is to develop, then local bursary funds, ear-marked for the support of faith leaders and workers, are needed. This is not simply a matter of enabling hard-pressed individuals and groups to attend courses that they would otherwise not consider – important though that is. Many faith groups, like other community groups, are reluctant to ‘spend money on themselves’ even when they do have funds (Paton & Hooker, 1990).
3. *Recognising emergent career paths.* For the longer term, some recognised roles and rudimentary career paths in faith-based community leadership/development are a precondition for sustained demand. Most faith leaders and workers are un- or under-paid, often in precarious positions, and have a limited peer group. Initiatives to bring together those who think of themselves as faith-based community leaders and workers, and to celebrate their successes, could be very important in attracting and retaining capable people and in encouraging change in their organizations. The emergence of practitioner networks – the first stage in ‘professionalising’ a role - will be a good indicator that lasting capacity is being built.

¹⁰ For example, in the 1980s it became apparent that the Government’s policies for job creation and community recovery required an enhanced management capacity in community-based organizations, especially those involved in delivering the Community Programme or otherwise engaged in community economic development (see eg, URBED 1988; Coopers and Lybrand 1989). As a result, a number of initiatives and programmes were developed to encourage associations and learning networks among the new practitioners, to articulate field-specific know-how through conferences and research, to incorporate this into new courses and qualifications (see, for examples, Paton and Hooker, 1990; Burt 1994; NCVO 1995).

4. *Creating a provider forum.* Provision can be enhanced by facilitating the exchange of resources and experience. The existence of relevant provision does not mean this is a mature and well resourced field – far from it. Many secular community-based trainers and teachers in Further Education working with faith bodies are unaware of the excellent resources available on conflict resolution and inter-faith work. Likewise, faith-based trainers are probably not familiar with good VCO resources on managing community organizations.

5. *Promoting the new courses and qualifications.* Faith-based colleges and some Further Education colleges are well placed to carry forward the promotion and use of the new qualifications – which might also be promoted as part of broader local efforts to inform faith leaders and workers about the support available.

This paper has examined how an initiative to train faith leaders and workers was conceived and enacted. It has argued that, in order to meet the ministerial timetable, the new course and qualification had to be constructed using generic approaches and pre-existing professional and social networks. The timetable also made it impossible to reach what had originally been envisaged as a key audience. Nevertheless, it provided the basis for some local faith and inter-faith groups to learn and reflect in ways that were clearly welcomed, and it produced materials and qualifications for wider use. These extend the range of resources and options available to groups that have been at best semi-detached and at worst part of a parallel society. In the end, however, the value of the new training will depend on whether and in what ways uptake and use of the training is encouraged, enabled and promoted – a much tougher and longer term challenge than the mounting of a pilot programme.

One danger is that this course and related lines of work will fall off the list of government priorities before they have become properly established. But continuing ministerial efforts to ‘drive change’ could be another danger. Capacity-building in the third sector has to recognise, work with and uphold the distinctiveness of VCOs (see, eg, Harrow, 2001; Cairns *et al*, 2005). This is not to romanticise their informal ways (which may be clique-ish, undemocratic and inflexible). The point is that leaders are constrained by the expectations of their followers (Heifetz, 1995); FBOs that run too far ahead of their communities simply lose members and legitimacy. The transition from an informal, loose-knit, volunteer-based group or network into an association that possesses some institutional qualities and a resource base, is full of dangers and pitfalls. The lasting success of any particular capacity-building involvement is not guaranteed. When these rather obvious truths are ignored the result may be a ‘shell’ organization, lacking community roots - what has been aptly called ‘manufactured civil society’ (Hodgson, 2004)

Finally, whatever reservations may be held about the public funding of FBOs in the area of social policy, it is clear that in this case government turned to FBOs, as it has to other sorts of VCO in the past, for compelling practical reasons. Helping ‘to develop the communication, negotiation, representation and other skills of faith leaders and workers so that they can operate more effectively and confidently within their own communities and British society’ would seem to be a necessary if not

sufficient part of addressing the cultural alienation and isolation of many Muslim communities in the UK.

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