

Cohesion and empowerment: examples from the evaluations of Connecting Communities Plus, Community Grants and Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund.



Introduction

In its final report in 2007, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) warned that the diversity of British society risks becoming a source of division between people (CRE 2007: 2). *Our shared future* contended that BME groups are still disadvantaged when accessing education, housing, healthcare and the labour market, and this coupled with rapid social change had led some people to revert to and reinforce religious and ethnic ties. This of course has been a growing concern for a number of years, and government initiatives such as the Faith Communities Capacity Builders Fund (FCCBF) and Connecting Communities Plus, Community Grants (CCPlus) are just some examples of how the issue is being addressed.

The two programmes were born from the Home Office's cross-sectional strategy document *Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society* (Home Office 2005), which merged the Government's community cohesion agenda with its racial equality strategy. The document sought to alleviate racial and religious discrimination at a national level, as well as improving education, employment, housing and health access for BME groups. The Community Development Foundation assumed the management of both the FCCBF and CCPlus programmes in 2005, which included conducting the programme level evaluation of both initiatives.

CCPlus was the smaller programme of the two, distributing £3 million over 3 years to local community groups in areas with high proportions of BME populations. The programme was delivered in 3 annual rounds, and grants were aimed at small, locally managed voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations with an average annual turnover of under £50,000.

In total 317 organisations benefited from grants of up to £12,000, with the grants intended to foster both racial equality and community cohesion. Organisations awarded CCPlus grants were expected to work towards one of four thematic funding priorities – 2 of these related to cohesion whilst the other 2 concerned access to public and local services (for a more detailed breakdown, please see Spratt, E. with Miller, S (2008)).

The FCCBF programme was much larger, distributing over £11m across 2 years. The fund had two key priorities: capacity building and inter faith work. The intention of the capacity building element was to enable groups to play a fuller part in civil society and community cohesion, whilst inter faith activity was described as bringing together people of different faiths and promoting mutual understanding, respect and cooperation. More than 900 groups and organisations received funding over the two annual rounds, including single faith and inter faith groups, with grants ranging from £5,000 to £50,000. However, whilst the fund was specifically for faith and inter faith organisations, certain types of activity could not be funded, including proselytism,

promotion of beliefs and acquisition of religious artefacts (for a more detailed breakdown, please see Spratt, E. with James, M (2008)).

The evaluations of both programmes, whilst focusing primarily upon their success and delivery, uncovered some interesting findings with regards to social capital, particularly in relation to community cohesion and empowerment. This paper will present the key findings from the evaluations of these two programmes with regards to the impact funded organisations had on levels of community cohesion and empowerment in their local area. It will begin by outlining the methodology used in these studies, before detailing key findings with regards to VCS contribution to community cohesion and empowerment.

Methodology

The key participants in both evaluations were the organisations being funded as part of each programme. However the evaluation also extended out to include other relevant stakeholders, such as beneficiaries, local authorities and infrastructure level organisations such as Councils for Voluntary Services. Due to the similarities of the programmes, analogous methodologies were employed for both evaluations, although extra surveys were conducted for the FCCBF study, as the evaluation had an additional focus on women and young people.

Due to the innovative nature of these programmes both evaluations began with a study of the application and assessment process used by CDF, before progressing to examine the impact of the programme on relevant organisations using self-completion questionnaires, area profiles and focus groups (for a more detailed methodology of each evaluation, please see Spratt, E. with Miller, S (2008) and Spratt, E. with James, M (2008)).

Key findings

Cohesion

Amongst funded organisations the term ‘cohesion’ was open to numerous interpretations, and whilst for the purposes of CCPlus the concept was employed with reference to relationships between those of different races and faiths, in other areas more attention was given to intergenerational cohesion or communities experiencing some other form of fragmentation. Some communities’ experience little exposure to other cultures, which can have a significant impact should the demographics of an area suddenly change due to immigration for instance. When aligned with increased competition for scarce resources and negative media portrayals, tensions can begin to develop. Such instances were observed during the area profiles conducted for the CCPlus evaluation and whilst indicative, provided interesting evidence of possible trends.

Many respondents highlighted the impact of other socio-economic factors on racial segregation, for example highlighting the physical isolation of rural from urban communities as one reason, with social class differences as another. Few communities demonstrated significant and sustained interaction with people of different cultural heritages, and in some cities certain areas were deemed ‘no go’. An

area visited in the South West perhaps best illustrates this, with a group of young Asian men describing how they feared venturing in to a neighbouring estate as they considered it to be for those of an African and Caribbean origin (Spratt with Miller 2008: 40).

The area profiles also found evidence of such tensions being accentuated by poorly communicated council policies, particularly with regards to the allocation of resources. Whilst the councils themselves always justified such policies as being on a needs basis (with those most in need being prioritised first), community members were often unaware of such policies and felt such practices to be unfair:

“There is a perceived problem with Somali refugees here, they get the houses...the resentment is certainly there among the African Caribbean, as well some sections of White [communities]”.

Project worker, CCPlus area profiles (Spratt with Miller 2008: 39).

Organisations found that through their CCPlus funded work they were able to bring people together of different cultures and heritages in a safe environment, where they could learn more about each other. This helped to allay fears and negative stereotypes by exposing people to cultures they may have had limited or no previous contact with. The most successful methods of bringing people together included key faith celebrations and national festivals, especially those involving food and social occasions.

Bonding

These studies uncovered the differing impact both programmes had on levels of social capital, cohesion and empowerment. The survey of CCPlus funded organisations uncovered varying degrees of social capital, with only 67% of funded groups stating that they worked with other VCS organisations in delivering their project (Spratt with Miller 2008: 48). Evidence from the CCPlus evaluation suggested a stronger presence of ‘bonding’ capital amongst groups characterised by ethnicity. Most of these relationships were not as a direct result of CCPlus however, and a number of organisations were supported in their work by a ‘parent’ organisation. Others had the support of a larger VCS group, such as two in the East Midlands who benefited from subsidised or free venues offered to them by other community groups serving similar populations (Spratt with Miller 2008: 49). The most obvious examples of bonding capital were amongst faith groups, who often benefited from the support of a religious body, for instance Christian groups provided with help from their churches. Whilst the churches did not run the organisations, they provided help with material support (such as venue space) and moral guidance (Spratt with Miller 2008: 48).

Bridging

FCCBF Faith groups also exhibited greater evidence of bridging capital, and over the whole programme an average of 97% of grant recipients ‘strongly agreed’ or agreed that they enabled people of different faiths and religions to get on together, as well as different races and ethnicities and adults and young people (Spratt with James

2008: 37). Some of these faith groups could also be described as ‘single identity’ groups (i.e. characterised by a particular faith or ethnicity), but evidence showed such groups to be reaching out to a diverse user group. Through FCCBF funded projects, relationships were established that spanned different classes, ethnicities, genders and religions.

Christian and Muslim groups were the most commonly represented faith groups, and it was between these two faiths that the highest percentage of bridging occurred. In both rounds more than half of small and large grant recipients involved two or more other faith groups in their funded activities. The following table depicts the percentage of Christian and Muslim organisations that involved some of the other main faiths in their work, broken down by the round in which they were funded (e.g. round 1, or R1) and the size of grant they received (e.g. a small grant, or SG):

Percentage of Christian and Muslim faith groups working with other faiths

		Christian	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh
Christian	R1: SG		31%	43%	23%
	R1: LG		46%	70%	70%
	R2: SG		21%	46%	25%
	R2: LG		53%	76%	40%
Muslim	R1: SG	91%	74%		70%
	R1: LG	65%	41%		41%
	R2: SG	47%	40%		33%
	R2: LG	53%	37%		21%

Source: (Spratt with James 2008: 38).

Inter faith working was one of the key priorities of FCCBF (for a detailed definition of inter faith work see Interfaith Network for the UK 2005), and 95% of funded groups considered inter faith work to have been successful (Spratt with James 2008: 29). Inter faith forums and councils were seen to be able to monitor tensions and exert considerable influence in their constituent faith communities.

In addition to working across faiths, single faith organisations also worked across varied ethnic groups. A high percentage of Christian small grants recipients funded in round 2, whose primary user group was of a White background, also involved users of a Pakistani origin as well as users of African ethnicity (Spratt with James 2008: 38).

For CCPlus funded organisations the story was quite different, with little presence of bridging capital evident. Some organisations were reluctant to work with other VCS groups they were effectively in competition with:

“...when organisations have to fight for resources, it becomes everyone covering their own back...how can you work with people at the same time making sure you protect your own interest ?”

Project worker, CCPlus area profiles (Spratt with Miller 2008: 49).

This was not the case with all CCPlus groups though, and some had successfully engaged with other VCS groups different to themselves. For example, a London-based Asian women's group had successfully built a bridge with a Peruvian cultural group housed in the same community centre as them. The Peruvian organisation provided a dance demonstration as part of a CCPlus event run by the Asian women's group.

Empowerment

Priorities A and B of CCPlus sought to increase the confidence and improve the experiences of BME communities in accessing local service provision. Research found that typically poor English skills hindered communities in finding out about and utilising service provision, and this is particularly a problem for older community members and women. The impact of this is incredibly detrimental, with poor English skills resulting in a lack of awareness, reduced confidence and isolation.

As such CCPlus funding enabled organisations to assist with empowering local communities, particularly where isolation was a problem. They were able to empower and inform their members, with the majority of organisations confident they could provide information regarding access to local services (72% of Round 1 organisations and 66% in Round 2). They also felt there were able to accurately represent their communities in negotiations with local service providers (Spratt with Miller 2008: 36).

Other CCPlus organisations increased their users' confidence and feelings of empowerment, such as an Asian women's group who highlighted how their users increasingly wanted to take a role in influencing the direction of the organisation. FCCBF also enabled organisations to empower its users, especially with its additional focus upon women and young people.

The majority of organisations conducting work with women and young people considered their projects to have been successful. For some of the women belonging to these faith groups, this allowed them a unique opportunity to express themselves in a safe, comfortable space alongside people with different backgrounds to themselves. Women also stated that they felt more confident in their ability to get involved in the local community and influence local decision making. Similar findings emerged amongst groups working with young people, although in addition organisations managed to engage young people in activities designed to keep them out of trouble and off the streets (Spratt with James 2008: 33-37).

Linking

With reference to those CCPlus funded organisations working towards priorities A and B, in round 1 of the programme 89% of organisations felt they had worked with local service providers to deliver their CCPlus funded projects; in round 2 the figure was 85% (Spratt with Miller 2008: 44).

The evaluation of FCCBF likewise found that a reasonably high level of engagement amongst funded groups with local government. Across both rounds, over 50% of grant recipients stated that they had worked in partnership with local government,

and this was supported by findings from the area profiles (Spratt with James 2008: 41). Other organisations remarked that they had good relationships with statutory organisations, with some suggesting they found it easier to build relationships with local government than with other faith sector organisations.

Despite the relatively high numbers of groups engaging with statutory organisations, for both programmes there was a common perception that some of these partnerships were tokenistic and had little, if any impact.. For example, only 55% of round 1 and 33% of round 2 CCPlus funded organisations felt the programme had enabled them to influence decision making around local service provision (Spratt with Miller 2008: 38).

A common factor between both programmes was the discrepancy in different organisations understanding of what it means to 'influence decision making'. For some organisations this entailed being involved in consultation or having links with those well placed in local service provision, whilst for others it meant being actively involved with local authorities and creating an impact on policies and issues most relevant to their communities.

Conclusion

Whilst cohesion and empowerment are traditionally difficult concepts to measure, the majority of funded organisations in both programmes believed they were successful in bringing together those of different faiths, races and generations and in helping them influence local decision making. However evidence highlights a significant discrepancy between organisations characterised by faith and ethnicity, with the majority of CCPlus groups working with just one main ethnic group whilst FCCBF organisations were slightly more successful in connecting up with faith groups other than their own - although in both programmes organisations were more likely to involve Muslim or Christian users in their work than those of other faiths.

A combination of factors can align to disenfranchise BME communities, including fears of racism and xenophobia as well as poor English skills. Further to this community tensions can arise as a result of poor interaction between various communities, and our research also highlighted competition of resources such as housing as a cause of both tension and segregation. Most organisations saw their role as promoting community relations and bringing together those from different backgrounds in safe environments. A key problem for many of the groups though was engaging with people from many diverse backgrounds.

Bibliography

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