

Engaging faith communities in urban regeneration

The importance of community involvement in urban regeneration is now received wisdom. This study, by a team from the Universities of Bradford, Coventry, East London and Sheffield Hallam, explores a neglected dimension of 'community' – the commitments, interests, organisations and social networks that relate to people's religious identities. It explores the present and potential contribution of faith communities and their members to regeneration, and the relationship of faith communities to official programmes of neighbourhood renewal. Research in Bradford, Coventry, Newham and Sheffield found that:

-  Many faith communities and their individual members already make a positive and significant contribution to regeneration work. Faith communities bring important resources to urban regeneration. However, these can be over-estimated, and there are significant inequalities among faiths in their present ability to engage.
-  Faith communities often share many common features and concerns with other organisations within the community and voluntary sectors. But they can also bring to regeneration activity distinctive and strong motivations for social action, their long-term local presence, the provision of informal settings and activities, and a commitment to listening to local people.
-  Faith communities are highly diverse in their theologies, values and organisation, though this often goes unrecognised. Engagement with faith communities makes demands on official agencies for 'religious literacy' and long-term encounter, for which they are often ill-equipped and ill-informed. Regeneration professionals may face difficulties in trying to relate secular, liberal values to a variety of religious values.
-  Many members of faith communities are active and challenging in their approach and require to be engaged, not merely enlisted. They reported both positive and negative experiences of involvement in urban regeneration programmes.
-  Urban regeneration provides opportunities for developing understanding and trust between diverse communities despite, and sometimes in the face of, the tensions and conflicts created by those local, national and international crises in which religion is implicated.

Background

During the past 15 years, urban regeneration policy in the UK has been marked by a growing emphasis on full community involvement. But translating this aspiration into reality has often proved elusive. The study sought to understand why this might be, and whether all the community networks that might inform and shape the direction of urban regeneration have been identified and involved. These questions prompted a research focus on a particular and neglected dimension of 'community' – the local commitments, solidarities, interests, organisations and social networks that relate to people's religious identities and affiliations.

For some, the participation of faith communities in government initiatives and multi-agency partnerships is controversial. Yet in many of Britain's most deprived areas, religion is a key element in the self-identity of local residents. In addition, their long-term residence gives them a depth of local experience rarely matched by that of regeneration professionals.

The research aimed to capture the experiences and perceptions of people with an insight into urban regeneration and community initiatives. It placed particular emphasis on the voices of people at local level. Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs reflected on government-inspired regeneration and renewal work. Professionals from government agencies and the voluntary sector discussed their views on engaging faith communities in their regeneration activities.

Involving faith communities

Over the last ten years, British governments have shown a growing interest in including faith communities in regeneration initiatives. Yet the study found that among regeneration professionals in statutory organisations and faith leaders operating at local level there was widespread lack of awareness and understanding of the detail of government policy and advice.

Some interviewees at the national level were concerned about the minimal level of public debate on faith community involvement. They felt that this agenda was being promoted by people of faith whilst others seemed content to let them get on with it.

Concerning local government, some interviewees suggested that:

- there is a failure to recognise faith groups;
- where there is recognition, there is misunderstanding;
- where there is some understanding there is often some, but certainly not total, rebuff.

Faith leaders had a clear message for government, regeneration agencies and local authorities. This message can be paraphrased as follows:

- In our communities, people are bruised and are living life on the edge, but they know what is best for them.
- Listen to the voices of the people.
- If you really want to achieve your outcomes, then initiatives have to come from local communities, including faith communities.
- You have to work through people who are relating to people, face to face, so that trust and confidence can grow.

Faith and action

For many of the people who participated in the research, religious faith was a source of motivation and direction in community activity. A significant feature of this activity was faith groups' long history of commitment to their neighbourhoods. Although the theologies and values of faith communities are highly diverse, most of the interviewees understood their beliefs as prompting them towards social participation rather than detachment. Many made strong connections between the spiritual and the social.

This study has challenged the perception that the idea of a discrete 'faith sector' can suggest a strong divide between the experiences and understandings of religious people and those of their neighbours. While people of faith may assign particular importance to spiritual regeneration and the quality of human relationships in their localities, they also share the practical and material problems and concerns of their neighbours.

"The kids get mugged very often, sometimes at knife point; and sometimes they are sort of lured into drugs. So these are social problems we face, which are part and parcel of the community as a whole, no matter what community you belong to." (Male Hindu Temple committee member, Newham)

These common perceptions, shared across faith and secular community organisations, invite the exploration of urban regeneration as a practical context for greater mutual understanding. Faith communities or their individual members are already important participants in numerous and diverse activities which can be broadly defined as 'regeneration'. For example, when a chapel in Burngreave in Sheffield had to close, the remaining elderly members showed their commitment to the district by providing start-up funding to transform the similarly struggling Furnival pub. The Furnival is now the venue for: a community cafe and informal place to talk; innovative work with children experiencing problems in mainstream education (in partnership with schools and the local education authority); a tots' group; a lunch club for older people; a credit

union; citizens' advice; and employment outreach. There is also weekly worship in the former lounge bar.

The study found that many people in faith communities apply critical, challenging perspectives to official regeneration programmes. These perspectives derived from their theologies and values, and also from their long-term local experience, and were often informed by substantial informal regeneration activity and participation in formal programmes. Some of this criticism was shared by other residents involved in regeneration programmes in deprived areas.

A recurring objection was to the distance between excluded people and the 'regenerators'. In the words of one interviewee:

"People make their bread out of Bradford's poverty and then go and live in relative security in secluded places." (Male Anglican Vicar, Bradford)

In addition, the view of faith interviewees was that for all the activity and rhetoric, something is missing from official regeneration schemes – they seem narrow, short-term and formulaic. Numerous faith respondents stressed the importance of human relationships in regeneration, and the need for time, space and a non-judgemental atmosphere in which to develop trust and understanding.

"You can't apply targets and outcomes to an area like this. What you need to nurture is process and people." (Female Baptist minister and leader of diverse faith initiatives, Sheffield)

Resources and restrictions

Faith communities bring significant resources to regeneration, in terms of both buildings and people. Across Britain, faith organisations and their members provide or host thousands of social initiatives for the wider population, as well as for their own members. These activities reflect a strong commitment to social care and often to a wider engagement in civic, social and political arenas. Much of this work is informal and self-funded. However, members of faith communities are often prominent in more official regeneration programmes, and many religious organisations contribute to developing and implementing regeneration policy. Traditional 'mainstream' Christian denominations tend to be the best networked, some with great success.

But in terms of resources, the buildings and personnel of many faith organisations are not sufficient for any great expansion of activity without external support. Indeed, with ageing memberships, the sustainability of even present levels of activity may be problematic.

Organisational capacities and cultures can

produce further constraints. As a result, many community organisations experience a lack of engagement with official schemes. This problem may be still more acute in the case of faith groups. Particular issues here are:

- impaired communication between faith bodies and secular agencies;
- official funding criteria and the discrimination and lack of understanding in funding processes perceived by some faith groups;
- the limited and unequal footing of various religious faiths within decision-making structures and processes.

Despite these difficulties, many interviewees had a long and impressive record of involvement with large public regeneration schemes. For example, a parish vicar in Bradford has enabled a major regeneration scheme to provide neighbourhood facilities. In Coventry, a local imam has worked for many years managing community advice centres. These interviewees were typical of many who have had close contact with public funding initiatives and the people who administer them.

However, there was also evidence of very mixed experiences of engaging in official regeneration programmes, and wide disillusionment arising from these experiences. Many interviewees criticised government-sponsored regeneration as: too complex; too centrally controlled and ill-attuned to specific local issues; too bureaucratic; not sufficiently holistic and inter-connected; and, in many cases, ineffective, producing a collective sense that money is spent but 'nothing ever changes here'.

The above issues require the attention of the Urban Policy Unit, the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, the Community Cohesion Unit and the multiplicity of other government units and 'arms length' agencies that support and promote the wider regeneration agenda.

Conflict, exclusion and collaboration

There are other problems to be overcome if the engagement of faith communities in urban regeneration is to be positive rather than negative.

Firstly, there is a lack of 'religious literacy' on the part of regeneration professionals. The diversity among, and complexity within, different faiths often goes unrecognised. This applies to both traditions and beliefs and to the way in which different faiths organise and structure themselves. The knowledge and experience of the many people of faith employed in secular roles need to be recognised and used.

Secondly, most of the religious groups interviewed, including Christian (both black and white), Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, have the perception

that they are discriminated against in the allocation of funding.

Thirdly, the difficulties of engaging women and young people in regeneration processes have to be addressed. In addition, the existence of incompatibility between secular and some faiths' definitions of appropriate gender roles and equal opportunities has to be faced.

Fourthly, it has to be acknowledged that there is evidence of competition and sometimes conflict within and among faith groups. These are challenges for the faiths themselves, but they are ones which government might help to address through more appropriate approaches to regeneration, especially in the use and distribution of funds.

Finally, in recent years religion has been implicated in several international and national crises and areas of tension. These events can be used to reinforce inequalities and divisions at local level. Collaboration in urban regeneration carries the risk of conflict and competition. But it may also constitute a context in which understanding and trust can be built through practical activity to address common priorities and concerns. Currently, there are numerous examples of impressive collaboration across ethnic and faith boundaries. One such example, in Coventry, is a new community centre managed by someone of Sikh origin and chaired by the parish priest. The new centre provides space for a 'black-majority church' to worship and Muslim women to meet. It also hosts a centre for refugee support, and a 'choice-based' local lettings scheme for affordable housing. To encourage this type of activity, both inter-faith and single-faith initiatives need recognition and support.

About the project

The investigation was based on four urban centres: Bradford, Coventry, the London Borough of Newham and Sheffield. Within each locality, the research had an element of narrower geographical focus on specific districts: Manningham and Girdlington in Bradford; Foleshill and Hillfields in Coventry; Burngreave in Sheffield; and the neighbourhood around Green Street in Newham. However, in each locality the unfolding fieldwork led the research team into city-wide forums and to interviewees with valuable insights stemming from their work in, and across, other districts.

Research was also conducted at regional and national levels. Here, perspectives were obtained from national faith leaders, some of whom were members of the government-established Inner Cities Religious Council; senior staff in national regeneration organisations; staff in regional organisations with a regeneration remit; and members of faith communities

engaging with this emerging regional regeneration apparatus. Most of the local faith participants in the project had a leadership role within a faith community or a faith-based organisation. But interviews were also carried out with people in non-clerical and community-related leadership roles.

The research encompassed traditional 'mainstream' Christian denominations, which are often prominent in urban policy and regeneration networks. It also included the following traditions and faiths, which are often less well represented within the official regeneration apparatus: 'black-majority' Christian churches, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The central, although not exclusive, research method was 95 semi-structured interviews at local, regional and national levels.

The research was carried out by Richard Farnell from Coventry University, Robert Furbey and Stephen Shams al Haqq Hills from Sheffield Hallam University, Marie Macey from the University of Bradford and Greg Smith from the University of East London.

How to get further information

The full report, 'Faith' in urban regeneration? **Engaging faith communities in urban regeneration** by Richard Farnell, Robert Furbey, Stephen Shams al Haqq Hills, Marie Macey and Greg Smith, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 516 X, price £13.95).