

Measurement, Quality and Reflection in Faith-Based Social Action

Jane Winter

In the Beginning...

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... and God saw everything he made. 'Behold' said God, 'it is very good'. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day, and on the seventh day God rested from all his work. His archangel then came unto him asking: 'God, how do you know what you have created is "very good"? What are your criteria? On what data do you base your judgment? Aren't you a little close to the situation to make a fair and unbiased evaluation?'

God thought about the questions all day, and his rest was greatly disturbed. On the eighth day God said 'Oh Lucifer, why don't you just go to hell?' Thus was evaluation born in a blaze of glory. (Adapted from Woodward and Pattison, 2000, p 301.)

This paper explores 'measurement as reflection' as a process for evaluating action and systems, and enabling development within faith-based social settings. It is the result of an 18-month research project which set out to answer two 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?

We, the Faith-based Regeneration Network, understand 'faith-based social action' as what happens when people of faith work together, often with others outside their faith community, in order to achieve real and positive change within their local community. It springs from the application of spiritual principles for the betterment of society and the improvement of people's lives.

The research was undertaken through a knowledge transfer process as a partnership between the Faith-based Regeneration Network (FbRN) and the Faiths and Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths' College, University of London. Other key partners were Community Matters, the Department for Communities and Local Government, and the Church Urban Fund. The project was funded from a range of grants. The questions arose as a result of previous research (Dinham, 2006, 2007; Dinham *et al.*, 2009). This identified the fact that while faith-based social action contributes a significant amount in local communities, measuring that contribution, and therefore giving value to it beyond the locale, is difficult because there are no standardised tools applied: every group does it in its own way, which makes comparisons hard and reduces the considerable collective impact that could be presented nationally and regionally to faith bodies, to the wider voluntary community sector and to policymakers.

In order to answer the questions arising we applied a standard quality assurance

framework, specifically designed for small local community organisations in seven faith-based settings. The standard, **VISIBLE**, sets out to help projects identify current practice and policy and to assess gaps in governance, management and delivery. It comprises seven categories, each with a number of indicators. Projects custom-make their assessment process through a mixture of set indicators and those chosen to meet their own developmental needs. Charities have to comply with set indicators evidencing legal requirements laid down by the Charity Commission. **VISIBLE** is accredited by the Charity Commission. It is owned by Community Matters, one of the partners in the research, who were keen to trial it in faith-based settings.

Seven projects ranged across the country, and across four faith traditions. They were carefully chosen against the requirements of **VISIBLE** and for their willingness to demonstrate the value or otherwise of a quality standard in faith settings. Some chose to participate in order to lead the way in their own faith traditions. Others wanted to take part because they were under pressure from funders or partners to demonstrate a quality standard mark, but none of the ones they had considered suited their organisation, mainly because they did not give space for demonstrating values.

Each project was allocated a mentor to support it through the standard. Mentors were selected for their experience in faith-based social action, including their knowledge of governance and management structures, organisational practice and community development approaches. The mentors had a working agreement with FbRN and their project.

The field research element was conducted through evidence-gathering as the projects and mentors worked through the **VISIBLE** process and through semi-structured interviews with a range of people connected to the projects and with focus groups representing other interested parties. The research has been written up and is available on the FbRN and Goldsmiths websites. Summary documents are available.

Measurement as Reflection

Faiths have been re-emerging in the public realm (Dinham, 2006) in three arenas: as providers of welfare and social services; as contributors to or detractors from 'community cohesion'; and in extended forms of participatory governance such as neighbourhood management. The public role of faiths has also proved controversial because it is seen as moving faith from the private sphere back in to the public realm from which, it had been assumed, Enlightenment processes had banished it.

While faith-based social action has increased in community settings there has been little take-up of support services offered through the wider voluntary community sector. There are three main reasons why faith-based settings have engaged less with these wider support resources.

First, faith communities do not necessarily think of themselves as part of the wider sector and are therefore unaware of networks and support services that are available, including policies and procedures for legal and regulatory compliance.

Second, they are sometimes nervous about losing their independence or compromising their values if they engage in partnerships and contractual relationships

with public bodies. Conversely public and voluntary sector networks are sometimes wary or suspicious of engaging with faith communities because they have anxieties about proselytisation.

Third, faith-based organisations are sometimes unaware of appropriate quality standards and processes that demonstrate values, impact and organisational systems, or they are uncertain about how to choose or access them.

Faiths have a long tradition of working in communities (Prochaska, 2006) and there is now a highly developed policy agenda which recognises and seeks to work with this (DCLG, 2008). This is likely to expand under the Conservative-Liberal coalition government (2010-). Articulating what faith-based projects do in civil society is crucial if they are to be understood and valued. 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 faith-based projects do to simply showing a moment or proving value to key audiences such as funders or policymakers.

Our starting point is that measurement is capable of enabling organisations to assess their work reflectively and continuously, in a cycle of change and development. We applied a version of reflective practice (Schon, 1983) to our research both in our assessment of the projects' use of the VISIBLE tool and in our own analysis process.

There are both internal and external reasons for measuring in faith-based social action. Evaluating what is done is an essential part of checking that expected standards are being maintained. Benchmarking shows where there is room for improvement and will demonstrate when that has been achieved. Thus, social action uses measurement and evaluation as a tool to help ensure quality and improve performance for the sake of those who use the services, the staff, volunteers and increasingly funders and partners.

Dinham and Shaw have argued in an article (2011) that the challenge is to measure quality in faith-based settings in ways which develop the activity rather than merely 'demonstrate' it or show it off. They argue that this is best rooted in community development approaches. They call this process 'measurement as reflection'.

The Findings

We found that the main reason why faith-based organisations undertake a quality measurement process is to seek organisational development and the improvement of services in a process of reflection.

Participants in the pilot projects said that a quality standard is worth doing for articulating values, reconnecting with passion, affirming commitment, promoting openness and transparency, surfacing tensions and barriers, and resolving them, encouraging participatory leadership, building professionalism, and improving quality. They emphasised a reflective approach over and above one which confines itself to demonstrating value to stakeholders.

Values

Participants spoke of their religious faith when discussing the values underpinning their work:

...fundamental principles of the Sikhism: first the services to the whole of mankind, if you're not providing them, then any Sikh fails to fulfil his commitment. It's not only for the Sikhs it's diversity for all communities.

They felt that this particular tool enabled their values and their relationship to their faith to be expressed and measured, as they hoped it would, even though it does not specifically ask about faith. This is a result of the flexibility of the tool which makes room for determining some indicators within projects as well as including many which are 'core'.

Passion

Surprisingly the research identified passion as a key finding, not just passion for the work or community but passion too for the quality standard because whilst being hard work it enabled organisational development and growth.

Participants suggested that the measurement process provides spaces for reflection which help faith-based projects to re-sharpen their focus. They said that this, in turn, re-energises them and their work.

Measuring may be highly effective in reconnecting to passion but it does not in itself necessarily result in action. At the same time, participants said that a failure to take passion seriously may undermine the activity which is strengthened by it.

They also said that it is important that they feel passionate about the quality assurance process if it is to be undertaken successfully. But they feel more passionate about the local area, about the organisation and the needs it meets too, and about the relationship between their faith and their service to others.

The research found that lead workers were the most passionate. They were the people who were driving the work and compiling the evidence. Chairs of boards were also passionate about the standard. They were aware of the sacrifice of time and energy it was costing to complete the evidence. Their passion stemmed from their faith motivation.

Commitment

There is a difference between passion and commitment. A person of faith's commitment to others, to the work and to the organisation is an outworking of his or her passion. If people are passionate about their work then they tend to be committed to it, whereas if people are committed to their work, they may not necessarily be passionate about it.

Volunteers, staff and trustees said that they are highly committed to faith-based social

action. In relation to the quality assurance project, they were much more committed to the process than to achieving a quality mark.

Transparency and Accountability

Measurement was also important to participants because of its role in making organisations transparent and therefore accountable. Participants said that clear systems and structures help stakeholders to get involved and understand their involvement.

They said that measurements should include the extent to which an organisation offers its services and activities to all, the experience of welcome and hospitality it offers, and the way it conducts its business in order to be open and transparent.

Expressing religious reasons for faith-based social action may be an important aspect of 'being accountable' since it spells out why a service is being offered, who it is intended for, and what it might feel like to use the service. While participants were clear that services should not 'feel' religious, some felt that being explicit in materials about the beliefs and values underpinning them would provide a fuller 'flavour'.

The faith-based organisations in this study said that this tool enabled them to be transparent and explicit about what motivates them and why the organisation provides such services, without distorting their values.

This is a critical point because a lack of clarity about what motivates faith groups can be a cause of tension when external funders and partners are wary or sceptical of working with them.

Tensions

The study found that an organisation may experience tensions between its mission, aims and values, and the requirements of external bodies. These can be constructively unveiled by the measurement process. It can also include internal tensions about the role of measurement.

Some participants considered that faith-based settings may be perceived and treated quite differently from other settings. Although faith-based organisations may find themselves in these situations of tension, participants said that going through this quality assurance process enables confidence-building by affirming what the organisation is good at and what it stands for.

Leadership

Participants said that a central issue in achieving measurement-as-reflection is how leadership is approached.

This is a relevant point in a policy context for civil society which increasingly emphasises entrepreneurship and social enterprise. These are models associated with competition and business-like approaches as a driving force for strong services. They emerge from a determination to limit the role of government in community-building

in order to make room for the energy and creativity which is understood to reside already in those communities. While this approach will work well in some circumstances in others it contrasts too starkly with collaborative models stressing as they do the importance of services being generated in the context of relationships in communities. Policies for 'localism' and 'community organising' will benefit from this 'community' disposition. A concern is that pursuing only entrepreneurial approaches could squeeze out these collaborative contributions and deprive communities of the contributions they can offer. Measuring - and thereby valuing - both will be important for the goal of strengthening civil society.

According to our sample, a collaborative approach is preferred by actors in faith-based social action settings in communities. Participants said that their way of working is collaborative, bottom-up, consensual, inclusive and empowering. The VISIBLE tool helped these settings to sharpen their focus on collaborative, community oriented approaches and to locate this within the pressures of changes in policy and practice.

An aspect of this is the confidence this tool gives to settings to make reflective self-assessment rooted in the community itself, independently of fluctuating policy contexts. Projects felt that this enabled them to return continuously to their core goals and practices and therefore to offer higher-quality services.

Another important part of leadership is mentorship, The key to effective mentorship in this study was the ability of the mentor to prioritise understanding above knowledge and to enter into the life of the community rather than assume a knowledge base, however helpful that might be.

Professionalism

The mentoring relationship is also part of humanising the measurement process, 'warming it up' and setting the 'professional' in the context of relationships. It is seen as an aspect of the hospitality which faith-based settings said was important to them. For this reason they did not link professionalism necessarily to a quality mark. They noted that being assessed as professional does not guarantee either a professional service or one that is well experienced by service users. They wanted to stress the importance of relationships as well as processes.

Participants said that measurement can increase professionalism as well as demonstrating it. They welcomed the opportunity to reflect upon their mission and purpose and find fresh ways of articulating it clearly. They also found this affirming internally.

They noted too the benefits of having a tool that is available to measure and demonstrate professionalism in a context where faith-based social action is not always seen as professional. They also 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. There was resistance to professionalising for its own sake.

In Conclusion

The lessons we share:

Faith-based social action can be demonstrated through a standardised quality assurance tool, providing the tool allows for the expression of values and motivations. It is not necessary to have a faiths-specific tool.

Our sample valued a quality assurance tool that was founded on community development principles and carried recognised credibility.

Policymakers, partners and funders can be assured of the quality of faith-based social action demonstrated through a standardised tool; this should reduce the resistance to working with faith-based social action projects or expose the myths that create resistance to partnerships.

Faith-based social action can take its place in the wider voluntary community sector as a serious contributor to civil society, able to demonstrate quality on equal terms; however faith-based groups need to recognise the imperative for demonstrating quality in the current context.

Faith-based social action values a quality assurance tool that enables measurement as reflection for the practical benefits this brings in organisational management and project development. This method of assessing quality need not be limited to faith-based actors.

A summary and full report of the project are available from www.fbrn.org.uk and www.gold.ac/faithsunit

Jane Winter is from the Faith-based Regeneration Network (FbRN), the leading national multi-faith network for community development.

References and Bibliography

- Ahmed, R., Finneron, D., Miller, S. and Singh, H. (2006) *Tools for Regeneration: Practical Advice for Faith Communities* (second edn) (London, Faith-based Regeneration Network UK (FbRN)).
- Allen, A. and May, C. (2007) *Setting up for Success: a Practical Guide for Community Organisations* (London, Community Development Foundation).
- Ashdown, J. (2010) 'Community action and faith-based community work', *Crucible: The Christian Journal of Social Ethics*, July-September 2010.
- Barr, A. and Hashagen, S. (2000) *ABCD Handbook: a Framework for Evaluating Community Development* (London, Community Development Foundation).

- Berger, P. (1996) *The Social Reality of Religion* (London, Faber and Faber).
- Billis, D. (ed.) (2010) *Hybrid Organisations and the Third Sector: Challenges for Practice, Theory and Policy* (Hampshire, Palgrave).
- Charity Evaluation Services (2004) *Quality and Evaluation in Voluntary and Community Organisations: Guidance Paper 3: Key Terms and Definitions* (London, Charity Evaluation Services).
- Church, C. and Skinner, S. (2006) *Change Check: a Practical Guide to Assessing the Impact of Your Community Organisation* (London, BASSAC).
- Clarke, J. and Newman, J. (1997) *The Managerial State: Power, Politics and Ideology in the Remaking of Social Welfare* (London, Sage).
- Cuppit, S. with Mihailido, A. (2009) *Demonstrating the Difference* (London, CES).
- DCLG (Department of Communities and Local Government) (2008) *Face to Face and Side by Side: a Framework for Partnership in our Multi-Faith Society* (London, DCLG).
- Dinham, A. (2006) *Faiths and Frontiers on the Starship Social Enterprise: Boldly Going as Faith-Based Entrepreneurs* (London, FbRN UK).
- Dinham, A. (2007) *Priceless, Unmeasureable: Faith-Based Community Development in England in the 21st Century* (London, FbRN UK).
- Dinham, A., Furbey, R. and Lowndes, V. (eds) (2009) *Faith in the Public Realm: Controversies, Policies and Practices* (Bristol, Policy Press).
- Dinham, A. and Shaw, M. (2011) 'Measurement as reflection in faith based social action', *Community Development Journal*, doi: 10.1093/cdj/bsq062
- Dyer, P. (2006) *Code of Governance Toolkit: a Practical Guide to the Code of Governance for the Voluntary and Community Sector* (London, NCVO).
- Ellis, J. (2009) *Bringing Outcomes into Focus in Quality* (London, CES Quality Conference 25/6/09).
- Etzioni, A. (1993) *The Spirit of Community: the Reinvention of American Society* (New York, Touchstone).
- Faithworks (2007) *Being Who You Say You Are: a Guide to Governance for Faith-Based Organisations* (London, NCVO).
- Faithworks (2008) *Ethos, Effectiveness and Excellence* (London, Faithworks).
- Jarvis, D., Porter, F., Lambie, H. and Broughton, K. with Farnell, R. (2010) *Building Better Neighbourhoods: the Contribution of Faith Communities to Oxfordshire Life* (Coventry, SURGE).
- Jochum, V., Pratten, B. and Wilding, K. (eds) (2007) *Faith and Voluntary Action: an Overview of Current Evidence and Debates* (London, NCVO).
- Lewis, J. with Randolph-Horne, E. (2001) *Faiths, Hope and Participation: Celebrating Faith Groups' Role in Neighbourhood Renewal* (London, New Economics Foundation/CUF).
- McCabe, A. and Phillimore, J. with Mayblin, L. (2010) *Understanding Third Sector 'Below the Radar' Activities: a Review of the Literature* (Birmingham, Third Sector Research Council Briefing Paper 29). Miller, S. (2007) *Keeping it Together: a Reflective Practice Tool for Faith-Based Community Development Practitioners* (London, FbRN UK).
- Murphy, E., with Ellis, J. (first edn) and Smith, L. with Matthews, S. (2010) *First Steps in Quality* (second edn) (London, Charity Evaluation Services).
- NCVO (2004) *Improving our Performance: a Strategy for the Voluntary and Community Sector: Executive Summary* (London, NCVO).

- Nicholls, J., Lawlor, E., Neitzert, E. and Goodspeed, T. (2009) *A Guide to Social Return on Investment* (London, Cabinet Office).
- Phillimore, J. and McCabe, A. with Soteri-Proctor, A. and Taylor, R. (2010) *Understanding the Distinctiveness of Small Scale, Third Sector Activity: the Role of Local Knowledge and Networks in Shaping Below the Radar Actions* (Birmingham, Third Sector Research Centre Working Paper 33).
- Prochaska, E. (2006) *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: the Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Richardson, L. (2008) *DIY Community Action: Neighbourhood Problems and Community Self-Help* (Bristol, Policy Press).
- Sanfilippo, L. and Cooper, M. (first edn), Murray, R. and Neitzert, E. (2009 update) *Tools for You: Approaches to Proving and Improving for Charities, Voluntary Organisations and Social Enterprise* (London, CES and New Economics Foundation (NEF)).
- Schon, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Boston, Arena Publishing).
- Walker, P., Lewis, J., Lingayah, S. and Sommer, F. (2000) *Prove It: Measuring the Effect of Neighbourhood Renewal on Local People* (London, Groundwork, The New Economics Foundation and Barclays PLC).
- Westall, A. (2009) *Value and the Third Sector: Working Paper on Ideas for Future Research* (Birmingham, TSRC Working Paper 25).
- Winter, J. (2010) *Practical Spirit: Interactive Project Development for Faith-Based Organisations Involved with Social Action* (London, FbRN UK).
- Woodward, J. and Pattison, S. (2000) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford, Blackwell).