

IVAR

Institute for Voluntary
Action Research



Supporting Community Bridge-Building Activities

Presentation to LB Newham April 2010

Margaret Harris
Professor Emeritus Aston University;
Visiting Professor, Birkbeck College, University of London;
Academic Adviser to the Institute for Voluntary Action Research
m.e.harris@aston.ac.uk

Introduction

- **Aim = to share experiences and discuss *how we might encourage and support community level bridge-building activities***
- **‘Bridge-building activities’ here taken as *small organisations, projects and groupings that aim to increase interpersonal contacts between people of different faiths and ethnic groups at the local level where people live and work* (‘BBAs’)**
- **Basis for presentation = recent research into the organisation and challenges of community bridge-building**
- **We can use findings to consider how local authorities like LB Newham can encourage and support community bridge-building activities**

What we know from Earlier Research about Bridging Activities

Earlier researchers have looked at

- “Bridging social capital”
- Psychological aspects of engaging with ‘the other’
- Multiculturalism and social cohesion concepts
- Peace and Reconciliation education
- Interfaith Dialogue

There are some cross-cutting themes in the earlier research

- Social cohesion requires that people interact not only within their own identity groups but *also* across the boundaries of those groups
- Cross-group contacts need to be organised and positively encouraged
- Cross-group interactions can be encouraged by using techniques which develop shared (‘superordinate’) goals, identities and experiences
- Social cohesion requires a supportive social, economic and public policy environment.

Our Research on BBAs

- **Research into organisational aspects of small, community level projects and organisations in three local authority areas: Birmingham, Oldham and Tower Hamlets**
- **Most community bridge-builders do not appear on formal databases of voluntary and community organisations or those held by local, regional or national governmental bodies – first task is to find them!**
- **In the three l.a. areas we found a total of 160 ‘BBAs’.**

Our Study

Local Government Area	Population 2001 Census	%Population non-white ethnic groups
Birmingham	977,000	30
Oldham	217,000	14
Tower Hamlets	196,000	49

- **Using networking and snowballing techniques, we identified 160 BBAs across the three areas; 80 (50%) were in Birmingham and roughly 25% were in each of Oldham and Tower Hamlets.**
- **We were able to conduct telephone interviews with representatives of 127 BBAs to find out their characteristics**
- **Later we looked at 9 BBAs in depth, focusing on the challenges they face and how they respond to the challenges**

Vision and Aims of BBAs

- **Majority of our respondents (64%) said that their BBA was initially driven by a specific vision to build bridges across ethnic or faith groups.**
- **Wide range of formal aims and also multiple aims**
- **95% of all BBAs were aiming at social cohesion and/or social interaction and/or mutual understanding. .**

	Count	Pct of responses	Pct of Cases
Social cohesion/social integration	113	18.7	90.0
Social contact/social interaction	109	18.0	85.8
Mutual learning/mutual understanding	102	16.9	80.3
Community development	96	15.9	75.6
Citizenship development/skills	73	12.1	57.5
Crime reduction	37	6.1	29.1
Physical regeneration/repair/improvement	28	4.6	22.0
Economic development	26	4.3	20.5
Others	20	3.3	15.7
Total	604	100.0	

Organisational Roots

- **More than one third (35%) began with a pre-existing third sector organisation expanding its range of activities or extending an existing project to include bridge building.**
- **27% began from an entrepreneurial initiative taken by a governmental organisation or, more usually, a third sector organisation.**
- **Thus about 63% of all BBAs were originally nurtured by a pre-existing organisational structure.**
- **However, 21% of respondents reported that their BBA was started on the initiative of a single entrepreneurial individual.**

Formal Status of BBAs

	Frequency	Percent
Part of a registered charity	62	48.8
Registered charity	20	15.7
Part of governmental org	14	11.0
Constituted community association	8	6.3
In a partnership	7	5.5
Company	11	8.7
No status/unsure	5	3.9
Total	127	100.0

Funding

- **89% of BBAs (112) reported being in receipt of some kind of external financial resources or in-kind external support.**
- **The most frequently reported source of funding was charitable trusts (21% of all responses and 45% of all BBAs) followed by grants or contracts from national government or the European Union (13% of all responses and 28% of all BBAs) and grants or contracts from local government (12% of all responses and 27% of all BBAs).**
- **39% BBAs received no funding from any governmental source.**
- **Only 9% of BBAs were receiving donations from individuals although 19% were receiving support in the form of paid staff time donated by another organisation and 17% were similarly benefiting from the involvement of volunteers attached to another organisation.**

Who is brought together by BBAs?

- **78 (61%) stated that their BBA was mainly about what was clearly ‘inter-ethnic’ or ‘inter-faith’ relationships; for example bringing together “Black, Asian and White men” or “working with the Muslim, Christian and Hindu communities”.**
- **25 (19%) BBAs were either solely or partially concerned with bridging between people from different countries of origin**
- **20 respondents (16%) described their activities as just ‘generally bridge building’**
- **Findings reflect earlier arguments that ethnicity and faith are categories which do not necessarily match personal experience of group boundaries or the difficulties in practice of clear categorisation.**
- **Findings also reflect the argument that, in the UK at least, faith and ethnicity are in practice overlapping categories.**

What bridging building activities?

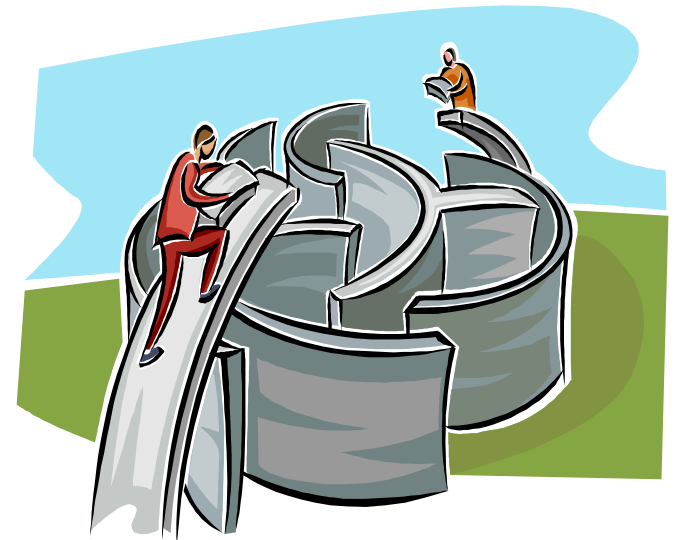
Most frequently mentioned activities were:

- **social (81% of BBAs surveyed);**
- **education, training and learning activities (72% of BBAs); and**
- **facilitated dialogue (64% of BBAs).**

Only four of the 127 respondents did not mention at least one of the above activities; and 54 (43%) mentioned that they did all three.

Two Kinds of Challenges for BBAs

- **Challenges which are organisational – some of these are challenges which are faced by other kinds of community groups and even larger voluntary organisations**
- **Challenges which are linked to the bridge-building vision – bringing people together across identity group boundaries**



Some *Organisational* Challenges

- **Heavy dependence on volunteers – lack of skills and threats to continuity**
- **Heavy dependence on just one or two key leaders**
- **Potential funders' concerns about accountability for funding and activities**
- **Difficulties of evaluation eg measuring impact**
- **Dealing with other voluntary organisations and with governmental agencies**
- **Isolation - lack of networks, linkages, experience sharing, infrastructure support**

Some *Bridge-Building* Challenges

- **Putting people into clear categories to satisfy funders – goes against ideas of boundary spanning**
- **Outreach beyond the committed few – how to find them and approach them**
- **People need help *preparing* to bridge build**
- **Local antagonisms between ethnic, faith and country of origin groups – racism, stereotyping, cultural differences**
- **Cultural sensitivity - and inadvertent causing of offence**
- **Mismatch between what funding is available and views of BBAs about ‘what works’**
- **Language barriers**
- **Competition between groups for scarce public resources**
- **Lack of political and media support for BB activities**

What are the lessons for us?

***Bearing in mind the
findings of the study***

**..... in what ways might
LB Newham provide
support and
encouragement to
community BBAs?**

