

**IVAR**

Institute for Voluntary  
Action Research



**Challenges of Community  
Bridge-Building**  
**Presentation to iCoCo Workshop**  
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# Introduction

- Aim of this presentation = provide an introduction to your discussions by sharing some findings from our recent research which looked at the challenges of *community level bridge-building activities*
- ‘Bridge-building activities’ in our project were *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)*



# What we know from Earlier Research about Bridging Activities

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## 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

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- **Research into organisational aspects of small, community level projects and organisations in three local authority areas: Birmingham, Oldham and Tower Hamlets**
- **We found 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. .**

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

# Organisational Roots

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- **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.**

## Who is brought together by BBAs?

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- **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?

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**Most frequently mentioned activities were:**

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

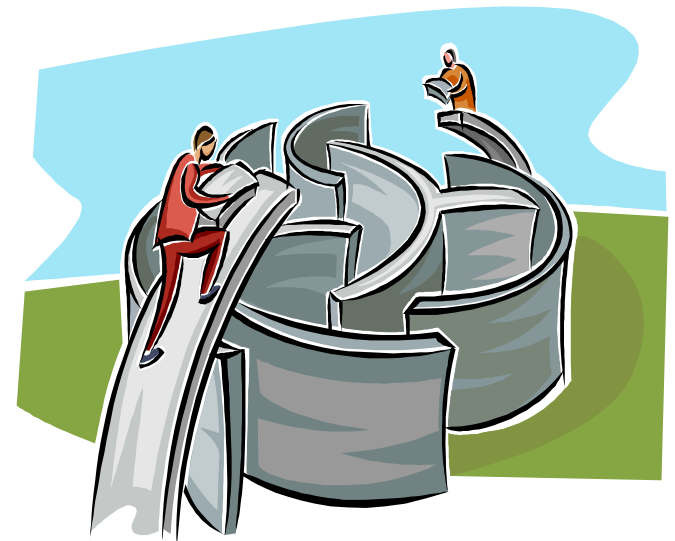
**Only four of the 127 respondents did not mention at least one of the above activities; and 54 (43%) mentioned that they did all three.**



# Two Kinds of Challenges for BBAs

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- **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**



# ***Organisational Challenges***

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- **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**

# ***Bridge-Building Challenges***

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- **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**

*Two Questions:*  
**What is good practice in community bridging?**  
**And**  
**How will the new Government affect us?**

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## Further Reading on the BBA Study

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- Margaret Harris and Patricia Young (2009) Bridging Community Divides: The impact of grassroots bridge building activities London: IVAR. This summary is available on the IVAR website at: [www.ivar.org.uk](http://www.ivar.org.uk)
- Margaret Harris and Patricia Young 'Developing Community and Social Cohesion through Grassroots Bridge-Building: An Exploration' Policy and Politics 37,4 2009 517-534
- Margaret Harris and Patricia Young 'Building Bridges: The Third Sector Responding Locally to Diversity' Voluntary Sector Review 1,1, 2010 41-58