



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

FACIT

FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS
AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN EUROPEAN CITIES

Faith-Based Organisations and Social Exclusion in European Cities

Policy Implications of FACIT, an EU-funded research project involving eight institutions led by Centre OASeS (Inequality, Poverty, Social Exclusion, and the City) of the University of Antwerp (Belgium)

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INTRODUCTION

After the withdrawal of the welfare state

The central assumption of the FACIT-project is that the gap left after the supposed withdrawal of the welfare state, is gradually being filled in by NGOs in general and by faith-based NGOs or FBOs in particular. The focus is on their role in matters of poverty and other forms of social exclusion (such as homelessness or undocumented persons).

If this is the case, are we then witnessing the introduction of charity as a pillar of welfare provision, as in of former times when such associations occupied the fore of social help? This would weaken the pillars upon which the welfare state – and in fact, modern society - is built, such as equality of access, non-discrimination, separation of the secular and the religious realm. But we might as well witness the beginning of a new type of welfare regime with a stronger focus on local policies and strategies and new interplays between local authorities and civil society organisations.

A unique project

The project is unique for several reasons. First, the increasing importance and diversity of FBOs has not yet received due attention in Europe. Secondly, it opens up a new track in welfare state research by the introduction of the role of 'welfare society', which is the civil society (or NGO) part of the welfare state. The use of a comparative perspective is the only way to identify the theme's common 'European' characteristics and its country or welfare regime's particularities. That is also the reason why Turkey has been invited to participate.

A FBO is a faith-based NGO

An FBO is any organisation that refers directly or indirectly to religion or religious values, and functions as a welfare provider or as a political actor. Whereas before, FBOs were almost exclusively inspired by Christian faith, today Muslim FBOs are becoming important players. Moreover, there is an increasing diversity within the Christian FBOs since the arrival of evangelical churches from outside Europe. Jewish FBOs also are part of our field of study.

This policy brief is based on results of the analysis so far. It contains recommendations on future trends, technical matters, country specific matters and good practices. Reliable statistics aren't available yet.

Poverty is a form of Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is a generic concept that refers to various situations and processes such as polarisation, discrimination, poverty and inaccessibility. Social exclusion implies two conditions: a hierarchical relationship between individuals, positions or groups and a separation by clearly discernible fault lines. Certain fault lines are the result of collective intervention (e.g. subsistence income or institutional isolation), while others arise without any explicit and deliberate intervention on the part of social actors (e.g. segmented labour markets).

Poverty is a specific case of social exclusion. It refers to the clustering of social exclusion in several areas of the individual and collective existence of people. This results in the poor being separated from society and from its accepted living patterns. The poor are unable to bridge this gap on their own.

Cities as places of problems and opportunities

The city provides a scale that permits the gathering in sufficient numbers of like-minded, faith-motivated, and action-oriented people. Moreover, cities have always been the focus of, sometimes contradictory, developments that are at the heart of our subject.

- First, since industrialisation poverty has been defined in urban terms. This situation has been mirrored by a concern of, initially private and then public, authorities with helping the poor and later combating (inner-city) poverty – not only out of care for the poor but also as a factor in a strategy of self-preservation.
- Second, cities always have been diverse; they exhibit a diversity of ethnic and immigrant groups that mirror both the opportunities and problems of social integration.
- Third, almost all faith-based NGOs have their origins in concern for excluded groups in cities, make the urban arena important for attention. This focus on cities also implies special attention to the concept of urban welfare regimes.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Welfare regimes and future trends

Welfare regime and the position of religions are main factors in the institutional context in which FBOs operate. Belgium, Germany, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Turkey and the UK – the countries we studied - greatly differ with respect to both. In some countries the state has extensive public responsibilities for social care and poverty reduction and for preventive social work. Welfare provisions are characterized by universalism and, accordingly, are not primarily concerned with the needs of the poor. In contrast, in other countries the state traditionally has played a weaker role in terms of social expenditure and the family has always acted as the ultimate safety net.

This different institutional context of welfare services might have repercussions on the amount and the activities of FBOs, which in fact is suggested by our data; FBOs are less present in Sweden than they are in Spain. In some countries they are replacing, in other countries they are supplementing the welfare state. Smaller FBOs mainly provide help to vulnerable groups in society; they work with those “beyond the fringes of society”, such as the homeless, prostitutes and drug addicts. These are domains which public authorities are reluctant to engage in. At the same time, it offers space to experiment with specific and new approaches (such as outreaching) from which more institutionalised services might profit later.

The scene of FBOs is a complex one

The scene of faith-based NGOs is a complex one. Some religious movements are orthodox and even fundamentalist in their faith, but progressive in their social point of view, as are some evangelical churches. On the other hand, some of the more liberal theological wings have become postmodern and less engaged in matters of poverty and social exclusion – and other social problems of contemporary society.

- Most FBOs focus on community-oriented activities, which range from service provision to activities directly related to the spiritual.
- Rather single issue FBOs work side by side with more inclusive ones.
- Catholic and Protestant FBOs tend to deliver welfare services (emergency help, counselling, advice) on a universal basis, without discriminating on the basis of faith.
- Muslim FBOs are mainly involved with integration and with the enhancement of the culture and tradition of their own communities, but they are increasingly aware of the ‘marginal’ position (in the sense of between two stools) of their communities and activities.
- Jewish FBOs also are very inward looking, assisting members in need in their community. The economic basis for their activities is rapidly weakening.

Organisational structure and values

In most countries, FBOs are present on different levels. The level has impact on the structure and the values of the organisation. Umbrella organisations – and larger organisations in general – usually are more professionalised and public relations activities occupy a more important role, for reasons of fundraising and of the instrumental value of the organisation for its leaders. They also are more dependent on public funding and thus take more account of legislation, such as on antidiscrimination and equal opportunities. Some FBOs (such as new Evangelic ones) refuse public money in order to maximise their degree of freedom in this respect.

Cooperation between NGOs

Faith-based and secular NGOs seem to cooperate wherever consensus is possible. There are sector specific networks and there is economically motivated coordination and lobbying. It is mostly about exchange of information and fundraising. This cooperation may be informal (and practical) or formal (and more on ideas). The main reason for the absence of cooperation is the lack of time and humanpower; ideological differences are not as important as expected. Recently interreligious platforms have been established, sometimes initiated by local authorities.

Relation with public authorities

Relations between FBOs and public authorities are not uncommon and are mainly described as 'good'. FBOs can often count on (conditional) financial support from government. Sometimes, they have a certain impact on policy-making; this mainly depends on their networks and on personal relations with individual politicians.

Does faith make a difference?

What makes the difference with other NGOs is the stronger 'prophetic voice' of the faith-based ones. Their concern for and access to 'hard-to-reach' groups also seems to attract people. Muslims are strongly motivated by the obligation to support the needy and the notion that good deeds will be rewarded.

While some FBOs hire exclusively faith members, more often they only expect their personnel to subscribe the (faith-related) mission statement. Some FBOs even attract personnel from other faith groups to mirror the religious backgrounds of target groups. Although faith is an important motivation, most of the personnel is also guided by other considerations, such as income, status, affiliation, leadership ambitions, fun.

Spaces of FBOs and of social exclusion

Although fairly differentiated between cities, to a large extent FBO activities reflect the marginal spaces of the city where socially excluded people are living or meeting: inner city "ghettos", public and/or social housing estates, transient or less visible spaces in the city. Bottom-up FBOs usually occupy locations in or on the edge of marginalised spaces, as is shown by the location of religious buildings that are used for FBO activity

Increasing polarisation

Because of the economic crisis – which is developing into a societal crisis - more people are in need; also because of this crisis, less resources are available to public authorities. Trends towards more inequality, social exclusion and even polarisation have been signalled. The deterioration of the situation in poverty areas in cities is striking.

New forms of poverty are developing, with old groups still demanding assistance for multi-problem situations, such as undocumented people and homeless people, and the very high poverty rates among households of ethnic minorities. These groups are especially vulnerable to the combination of the faith message and the provision of social help of radical faith groups (new evangelic churches, fundamentalist Muslims)

Civil society actors are even more crucial than before

Therefore, qualitative and professional civil society actors will be needed even more than before, in sectors that traditionally were covered by public authorities and in recently developing ones that fall outside their scope. Faith-based and secular NGOs are generally better placed than other actors when it comes to dealing with groups and situations that are in society's margins (and often on the border of legality).

Social enterprises – often linked to FBOs - are contributing to society's sustainability in different respects: they create jobs for people outside the labour market, they provide low-priced quality goods and services, and they recycle used goods and so contribute to reducing the ecological footprint.

Increasing diversity: a threat to cohesion?

FBOs also contribute to social cohesion, which may be seen as the social dimension of sustainability. Often FBOs play a positive role in cohesion through bringing people together and promoting mutual solidarity between the 'have's' and the 'have not's'.

Diversity also is increasing and ... diversifying, and this has long-term effects on the provision of social protection and social services. Due to the rising share of elderly migrants, especially of Muslim faith, who wish to stay in the host country, demand for homes adapted to these people's customs is increasing. In these homes Islamic dietary laws are observed, people are able to freely practice their religion, they are assisted by an imam or by some other representatives of a local mosque.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

Recommendations and good practices

Some of our recommendations are illustrated by specific problems that we identified for a given country; others by one or several good practices. This does not imply that these are the only problems or successes – we selected some of them from the areas that were subject of our study.

FBOs should be treated on an equal footing

The need to support faith-based NGO's does not mean that they are above evaluation and control by public authorities. Referring to 'higher values' is no safeguard for receiving funding unconditionally.

On the other hand, new initiatives do not always successfully develop because civil society actors cannot live up to the existing administrative procedures and budgetary and contract controls. More equity, accountability and transparency are needed.

- (Belgium) To be recognised as an elderly home, for instance, a prescribed minimum number of beneficiaries is needed. In order to address new needs and to introduce innovative practices, the threshold for starting new (funded) initiatives has to be lowered.
- (Germany) Migrant FBOs in Germany, especially Islamic ones, should - as their Christian counterparts - be entitled to the legal status of welfare organisations. Then they would benefit from tax exemptions, have access to public money and be recognised as part of society. The recognition by German government of the Muslim population as a religious community would also facilitate receiving benefits for hiring clergymen at universities ('alim') and introducing Islamic theology at German universities; it would mean less difficulties to build mosques and member taxes could be levied.
- Turkish government should introduce a legal regulation for FBOs operating in the domain of social assistance, in order to reduce their vulnerability to international manipulation. It should also reorganise its relationship with civil society actors. NGOs and FBOs should be able to act independently from party politics.

Foster the sustainability of civil society actors structurally

The growing gap between increasing needs and limited public money puts pressure on public service provision and FBOs' activities and the issue of sustainability of FBOs becomes vital.

Because more and stronger FBOs are needed to cater for the increasing problems and marginalised groups, public authorities should foster their sustainability (e.g. by allowing tax exemptions for donors). This is especially urgent for social enterprises.

Increase quality and professionalism of FBOs

The evaluation of services and programmes should become a structural feature, both through independent beneficiary evaluation (qualitative and quantitative) at neighbourhood level and independent evaluation agencies.

- The UK already has well-established audit and regulatory bodies to ensure accountability and transparency in the voluntary and faith-based sectors.

Training should be made available to all religious groups, so that they have the same capacity to bid for contracts as secular organisations.

- Today, this capacity is unevenly present among different religious groups in the UK, particularly among black and minority ethnic groups.

In order to maintain efficient service provision, there should be a collective bargaining deal for FBOs' and NGOs' hired professionals to grant adequate retributions and working conditions.

Strengthen support for voluntary work

Public authorities should put the struggle against social exclusion high on their agenda and keep it there. Because less public funding is available, NGOs and FBOs will depend more on voluntary work. To facilitate this development, the supporting framework for voluntary work should be strengthened (e.g. advice on volunteering, compensation budget for costs).

Promote collaboration between faith groups and other civil society organisations

In stimulating interreligious cooperation in Sweden, local governments and FBOs should keep the gender dimension in mind and pay attention to the specific needs and demands of women.

- Local governments and FBOs in *Sweden* contribute in different ways to successful interreligious cooperation: through cultural and social integration; interreligious integration of social service provision (e.g. FBOs serving target groups of other faiths); interreligious conflict resolution (e.g. city governments bringing together religious leaders of all beliefs to solve particular problems in the city).
- In the *UK*, 'London Citizens' exemplifies the political potential of collaboration between different faith groups, and labour, educational and community-based organisations. The broad-based organisation represents an important non-parliamentary political route that revitalises the democratic deficit found in the mainstream political process. Campaigning on shared social issues in their neighbourhoods such as Living Wages, low cost housing, and citizenship for undocumented persons, the organisation has had some success in putting marginal issues firmly on the political table.

More active collaboration should be enhanced between public administrations and FBOs linked to minority religious groups that have a strong potential in social action (Protestant Churches, Muslim community).

Participation of civil society, especially of people living in poverty

Not only the traditional civil society actors should be strongly involved in policy-making and policy implementation; special attention should be paid to people living in poverty and social exclusion.

- In Belgium, participation of civil society actors is rooted in the Flemish poverty decree and in the federal follow-up of the General Report on Poverty. This resulted in initiatives such as the creation of poverty associations (some of which are faith-based) which are represented in formal decision-making at the federal, regional and local levels and of so-called 'experience experts' who are employed in public administrations at those levels and watch over the effects of legislative initiatives on the condition of people experiencing poverty.

Non-discrimination, equal opportunities and gender

- In stimulating interreligious cooperation, local governments and FBOs should keep the gender dimension in mind and pay attention to the specific needs and demands of women.
- Local governments should be sensitive to the needs and demands expressed by congregations of different religions when it comes to their physical presence in a city. FBOs, on their part, should be keen not only to reserve buildings for religious aims, but also to use it for activities promoting the needs and demands of poor people irrespective of their belief.
- Local governments and administrations in Sweden should be willing to enter into dialogue with dedicated persons who are willing to initiate activities. They are important links between local government and civil society and should be met with respect.

Take the spatial dimension into account

Given the close link between forms of social exclusion, certain urban areas, and the activities of secular and faith-based NGOs, initiatives integrating the three facets should receive special attention and be promoted.

- Between 2006 and 2009, the city of Cologne in *Germany* has developed the Social Area Focus, a quite successful area-based project. The Social Area Focus is led by a working group of FBOs, NGOs, local politicians, private persons and firms, which identifies poverty areas and installs facilities and provides services where they are needed. This collaboration has improved living conditions in deprived areas and the division of tasks has resulted in more effective services.
- In the last decade, municipalities, regions and the *Spanish* State have developed integration programmes aimed at immigrant communities and locals, both at micro and macro level. Some FBOs, such as Secretariado General Gitano, have worked towards integrating the Roma community, and especially women within this community, in the labour market and the educational system. Some small Catholic FBOs are also working to provide assistance to groups that are legally and physically out of the system. This is the case for the parish of San Carlos Borromeo in Madrid, which is working with Roma Romanian immigrants in slums.

Pay attention to groups in a situation of multiple deprivation

The *Dutch Social Support Act* (1 January 2007) is meant to manage the integration of people with limitations in society. It makes municipalities responsible for home care, supporting and activating care, as well as the regulations for transport, client support and various subsidies. In other words, local authorities have a leading role in implementing the law. Yet, care providers are able to negotiate contracts with municipalities to formulate a proactive and community driven intervention programme. In this respect, the law has impacted on the way that FBOs operate. It has stimulated FBOs to work more professional and to collaborate with politicians.

FBOs should (be encouraged to) take account of the specific needs of elderly migrants and to invest in special elderly care initiatives. It is preferable this is done in mixed homes, respecting the different religious customs. Such homes have the potential to become new arenas for integration.

In *Turkey*, there is evidence of actors coming together to strive for a common goal. A coalition has been established between different kinds of NGOs (Islamist, gay/lesbian and others) to form an umbrella organisation. The mission of this organisation is to fight against all forms of discrimination in the country.

The transnational dimension is also important

There is a need in the Netherlands to raise awareness about the transnational dimension of the work of FBOs as part of a social justice agenda in European countries. Some FBOs cater for the victims of the sex 'slave trade', mainly African women who are brought to the Netherlands to work in the prostitution industry.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives of the research

- To assess the significance of faith-based NGOs (FBOs) from a variety of faiths (Christian, Islamic, Jewish) in the policy and practice of urban social policy in general, and in combating social exclusion and promoting social cohesion in particular.
- To describe and to analyse the institutional and political conditions under which FBOs have become increasingly present in urban social policies.
- To evaluate the extent to which FBOs have been informed and are operating in a context of a shadow state formed by the retrenchment of welfare states.
- To identify the relations that FBOs have developed, formally and informally, with other NGOs and with national and local public authorities.

Methodology

Our approach is a specific and somewhat innovative form of triangulation. By using more than one method, results are triple-checked; we can be more confident if different methods lead to the same result.

Apart from the traditional activities (review of relevant literature, development of a conceptual framework, mapping of the field), face-to-face interviews have been conducted with a variety of key figures from public authorities and from civil society. The information thus collected made it possible to put faith-based NGOs in their institutional and organisational framework, which is European, national and local. That is why we selected countries from different welfare regimes (including a candidate member state) and more than one city in each country.

The scientific and the policy relevance of the study was increased by using a formerly developed and tested *cross-evaluation method*. A small international team – consisting of the co-ordinator and of a changing group of other foreign experts from the research consortium – visits the countries and interviews a selection of policy-makers. The informative basis for these interviews consists of the national report and the results of the above-mentioned interviews that the national team had with local key witnesses. The interviews are structured according to a series of items, in order to increase the degree of comparability.

Expected results

- To increase knowledge about urban forms of increasing social exclusion and decreasing social cohesion in a context of retreating welfare states.
- To uncover the more prominent role of FBOs in combating poverty and exclusion in cities and in Europe.
- To identify a European dimension of the position of FBOs in relation to poverty and exclusion in cities, bearing in mind dynamic relations between national and local diversity and common European characteristics.
- To construct a common framework for the analysis and evaluation of policy and governance implications of FBOs, aiming to augment their European characteristics.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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www.facit.be

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Further reading

In publication: a series of national reports, integrating the research results from the participating countries (institutional framework, empirical data, interviews, cross-evaluation) and from the 'second countries' on which a supplementary report has been written (France, Ireland, Portugal, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Austria, Denmark).

Expected: a publication at The Policy Press. Title: *The FBO Phenomenon*. Eds Paul Cloke, Jan Vranken & Justin Beaumont.

Planned: a 'Handbook for Practitioners' (field workers, social workers, policy-makers) that will help to understand recent developments and offers models to handle the situation while respecting a number of basic tenets of our welfare state.

Several reports, such as the contextual ones (concepts, method, welfare state dimension) are on the website www.facit.be or will soon be there.