Global Exchange
on Migration & Diversity

What works in building common ground and shared values?

A number of critical moments have shifted the political and media narratives on national and local belonging in Britain in the past few years. In 2014, the lifting of EU labour market restrictions, the European Parliament elections, and the Scottish referendum all raised hotly debated questions about the settlement of European migrants and British identity. In addition, international conflicts and British foreign policy –from Gaza to Syria – have resonated in local communities, and questions surrounding the travel of British citizens to Syria and Iraq to fight for Islamic State have raised questions about the resilience of belonging.

The evidence base

To date, evaluation has largely focused on the structural indicators of integration, such as the performance of particular minority groups in the labour market or the education system. There has also been much academic research into the factors which contribute to or inhibit a 'sense of belonging' among particular minority communities, including a recent raft of research on white working class communities.[1] Some research has offered indicators to measure social belonging, including the 2004 framework *Indicators of Integration* commissioned by the Home Office, or the 2009 UK Equality and Human Rights Commission framework for measuring 'good relations.' However, there has been little effort to build on these indicators with systematic monitoring and there has also been less research on the impacts of specific policy and interventions on shared values, levels of belonging and trust within communities.

Such indicators are difficult to define and measure, but they constitute a significant piece of the integration picture. The challenge is that the markers of common ground and shared values are most clear when defined in the negative; in other words, it is much easier to identify signs of failure (e.g. crime and anti-social behaviour). Research following the 2011 riots indicated a sense of marginalisation among the rioters, with less than half feeling 'part of British society', as compared with 92 percent of the population as a whole.[2] Research on motivations to join extremist movements has consistently shown that those who are most vulnerable to these groups are often lacking a sense of belonging. There is thus a clear sense of what failure looks like, but not success. There is also little understanding of the spectrum of shared belonging, and just how much shared belonging is needed to prevent anti-social behaviour or violence. Thus, interventions to promote common ground are often delivered without explicit aims, and without any solid evaluation to monitor whether they are having an impact.

There has been a recent focus in Britain on citizenship tests and ceremonies for new immigrants and ethnic minorities, focusing on British values and on loyalty to the nation. Much of the evidence base on belonging is comprised of national survey results on Britishness, including what characteristics the general public believes constitutes being 'truly British.' However, debates on what constitutes Britishness – and publicly reasserting the values underpinning British identity – can distract from the actual aims of initiatives developing shared values and common ground.

What works?

Though the evidence base for initiatives promoting a sense of belonging remains weak, there are some key themes emerging from research across the UK and Europe:

- Socio-economic integration and equality of opportunity across policy domains are important but insufficient conditions for a 'sense of belonging'. However, a number of preconditions can be met in order to create the conditions for citizens to feel rooted in their communities, and much of this can be achieved at the local level. For example, recent research has called for the development of 'settlement support' packages for new migrants to encourage socio-economic stability in order to facilitate rootedness in local communities.[3] Some European cities have specifically developed strategies and monitoring systems to ensure that mainstream institutions and policy fields are open and accessible to diverse citizens. Berlin monitors the 'intercultural openness of mainstream institutions', including the proportion of service providers that have undergone intercultural training.[4] Vienna developed a system in April 2010 to monitor awareness and acceptance of diversity across mainstream policy fields in the city.[5]

- Initiatives led at the local level – from the bottom up – are particularly effective in shaping a sense of belonging to the local community. Top-down narrative-building initiatives at the national level, including political rhetoric and promotion of national celebrations, alone will not be sufficient to build common ground. For example, research following the Queen's Jubilee and the Olympics showed no growth in public identification with Britishness as a result of the events.[6] Identities are constructed by daily experiences, and responses will need to be tailored around these individual experiences, and involve active roles for people.[78] Local and regional authorities can play what Gidley and Collett call a 'place-shaping' function, building a city or regional sense of belonging which citizens can buy into.[9] Initiatives to rebuild and restore trust in local institutions can also have an impact on sense of belonging, as when people trust their local institutions they are more likely to feel that they belong, and that they can influence decisions locally.[10]

- Facilitating interaction between individuals from different communities, and across divides, can promote a sense of common ground. One-off events like football tournaments and street parties can be meaningful in the short-term, but will not build long-standing relationships across communities, or lead to long-term attitude changes, unless they are repeated at regular intervals with the same groups, incorporated as part of a broader local engagement programme, or mainstreamed.[11] Programmes with evidence-based methodologies for meaningful interaction are more likely to succeed. Evidence from existing initiatives shows that people unite over common experiences, and shared concerns can provide the basis for a shared sense of belonging at the local level.[12]

- A shared sense of belonging will not be possible without measures to explicitly tackle divisive attitudes and myths head on. Prejudices and myths can often be traced back to perceived grievances about different groups, and in some cases real grievances. Local authorities in Britain have been hesitant to engage directly with those in their constituencies that are vocal about their negative attitudes towards minority groups. Local authorities can engage directly with prejudice, rather than ignoring it and hoping it will disappear, as these attitudes can undermine a sense of common ground, both for those perpetuating them and those targeted by them. However, there must be a methodology for engaging with these constituencies, and research on best practices across Europe indicates that it is important for those with grievances to have their views listened to and heard, before they can effectively be challenged.[13]

- A shared sense of belonging is most thrown into disorder during local or national traumas, including riots, acts of terrorism, organised crime and media scandals. Rapid response mechanisms developed at the local level can ensure communities remain tied together and not driven apart at such times. Positive examples can be found in local authorities like Luton and Rochdale, where local councils and police have piloted innovative methods of involving the community in dialogue and mediation, and promoting a sense of unity following divisive local events.[14]

Given the need for stronger evidence on the impacts of interventions to promote common ground and shared values, one cannot rely solely on evidence-based approaches and needs to allow some space for innovation and testing of methods. However, evaluation should be prioritised and built into any initiatives to develop a stronger evidence base for initiatives to build common ground.

1. See research by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Open Society Foundations, IPPR.

2. The Guardian and LSE (2011) 'Reading the Riots: Investigating England's summer of disorder.' UK.

3. Sachrajda, Alice and Phoebe Griffith (2014) 'Shared ground: Strategies for living well together in an era of high immigration'. IPPR, UK.

4. Brandt, Lisa and Gunilla Fincke (2012) 'Germany: monitoring integration in a federal state,' in *Measuring and monitoring integration in Europe*, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, The Hague, March 2012.

5. Kraler, Albert and David Reichel (2012) 'Monitoring integration in Austria,' in *Measuring and monitoring integration in Europe*, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, The Hague, March 2012.

6. Jones et al. (2013) 'England and its two unions: The anatomy of a nation and its discontents'. IPPR, UK.

7. Muir, Rick (2014) 'Reclaiming the state,' in (eds.) Phoebe Griffith and Alex Glennie, *Alien Nation? New perspectives on the white working class and disengagement in Britain*. IPPR, UK.

8. Sachrajda, Alice and Phoebe Griffith (2014) 'Shared ground: Strategies for living well together in an era of high immigration'. IPPR, UK.

9. Collett, Elizabeth and Ben Gidley (2012) 'Attitudes to migrants, communication and local leadership: Final transnational report'. COMPAS. University of Oxford.

10. Broadwood, Jo and Nicola Sudgen (2009) 'Building Cohesive Communities: What frontline staff and community activists need to know'. Department for Communities and Local Government, UK.

11. Ramalingam, Vidhya (2014). *On the front-line: A guide to countering far-right extremism*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, UK.

12. Collett, Elizabeth and Ben Gidley (2012) 'Attitudes to migrants, communication and local leadership: Final transnational report'. COMPAS. University of Oxford.

13. Ramalingam, Vidhya (2014). *On the front-line: A guide to countering far-right extremism*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, UK.

14. Ibid.

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