

## Muslims and community cohesion in the UK

### Synopsis

In order to investigate factors which contribute to or undermine community cohesion in Britain, the project focuses on three contrasting urban areas of the UK in which significant numbers of Muslim migrants and long term Muslim residents are living. Research involves commissioned locality papers, interviews with new Muslim migrants, long-term Muslim residents, new non-Muslim migrants and long-term non-Muslim residents, as well as interviews with national and local policy makers and local service providers.

### Background

Community cohesion is a contested term. A cohesive community has been defined by the government as one where there is a common sense of belonging for all communities, where diversity is positively valued, and where strong positive relationships are developed between people from different backgrounds. The factors which promote cohesion, obstacles to its achievement and the indicators that might be used to measure it, are still open to debate.

Benchmarks for the level of cohesion focus on attitudes and behaviour towards other, such as the percentage of people who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds can get on well together. Benchmarks of this kind have not yet been related in research to Muslim migrant communities. A series of events, not least 9/11 and now the London bombings of Summer 2005, coupled with evidence on poor socio-economic outcomes, have given cause for concern that Britain's Muslim communities may experience particular barriers to inclusion in local communities.

Muslims are both settled and recent migrants. In the 2001 census, nearly 46% were born in the UK, so that there are now second and third generation British Muslims. However, Muslims also continue to enter the UK as workers, refugees and spouses. Recent Muslim migrants have included Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, Somalis and Sudanese, as well as 'marriage migrants' from the Indian subcontinent joining established populations originating from this area. Yet we know remarkably little about the diverse experiences of, and community cohesion issues surrounding, new migrants or how these might relate to those of Muslims who have lived in the UK for a long period or were born here.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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## Aims and objectives

The project entails research that will increase our understanding of the multiple factors which contribute to, or undermine, community cohesion in three localities where there are established Muslim communities and new arrivals. It is appropriate to have one area where 'new' Muslim migrants are from a variety of different ethnic groups compared to the 'old' Muslim communities, for example Iraqis, Somali, Turkish or Bosnian, settling in an area with an existing Pakistani, Indian or Bangladeshi Muslim community. The second area is where there are both 'new' Muslim migrants from diverse groups, as well as 'new' Muslim migrants from the same ethnic groups as the 'old' Muslim communities, joining existing communities through marriage. The third area is one of lesser diversity where there is an extensive extent of marriage migration and family re-unification.

Through analysis of the residents' specific socio-economic circumstances and responses to contemporary local events, the project will provide insights into common and differential aspirations, perceptions, experiences and strategies among new arrivals, local Muslim and non-Muslim residents. It will also examine the extent to which and the ways, new Muslim arrivals are integrated into existing Muslim communities. In addition interviews with community representatives, local agencies, key organisations and public officers in these areas and other parts of the country will highlight the importance of local v. national factors affecting dimensions of cohesion amongst various Muslim communities and their broader social settings.

## Methods

The three localities – Newham, Birmingham and Bradford – were chosen according to the above theoretical considerations and criteria such as the size of the Muslim population, numbers of recent Muslim migrants, socio-economic and deprivation information, the level of Muslim representation on the local council and local authority comprehensive performance ratings. In each of the three sites, semi-structured interviews will involve 50 new Muslim migrants, 20 established or UK-born Muslim residents, 15 new non-Muslim migrants and 15 UK-born non-Muslim residents. Where possible residents will be interviewed by interviewers of the same sex, background and language. Interviews with community leaders will take place in these localities and across the country. The quantitative data will be analysed with SPSS, and the qualitative data will be organised within a qualitative software package such as NVivo.

## Work in progress

An annotated bibliography of literature on new Muslim migrant communities in the UK has been completed, and local area background papers covering the structure, institutional landscape, and governance framework of the chosen areas are being prepared. The interview schedules are being finalised in consultation with the advisory board and other experts, and will be piloted shortly before being taken to the respective field sites by the beginning of 2006.

**Planned Outputs:** Final report for JRF, policy and practitioner summary, seminars, academic articles

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