

Approaches to Community Development: A Case Study of NGOs in Malaysia

It has been proposed that welfare services constitute a site where the sacred and secular interact, but what distinguishes a so-called faith-based organization from other services may not be readily apparent. Nor is there any consensus as to what the term faith-based organization means or even whether it is an appropriate term to describe initiatives of religious groups for whom faith is not a key component of their religion. That faith is often regarded as synonymous with religion reflects the overwhelming influence of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the literature about welfare provision by religious organizations, and a lack of recognition that faith is not necessarily the most important tenet in some other religions. But some have proposed that the focus on faith reflects a predominantly Protestant and Western perspective in the literature. The definitions which has been adopted by those writing about faith-based organizations usually refer to any kind of faith-related voluntary association, including churches, mosques, synagogues, and congregations, engaging in social welfare. Such a broad definition includes organizations where welfare provision is not among their key reasons for existence. This study examines nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia in terms of their approaches to community development. It focuses on a typology which views NGOs as being divided into faith-based and secular. It then tries to explore the hypothesis that although faith-based and secular NGOs appear to be similar, several factors may contribute to differential project outcomes. The study provides empirical research to inform recent scholarship that relies primarily on anecdotal evidence to support the claim that faith-based and secular NGOs are distinct. It also increases our knowledge about the factors that contribute to effective NGO project outcomes and responds to researchers who question the viability of the NGO model of community development. The research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the governance and operations of four well-established NGOs in the country. Data on the NGOs and their affiliated institutions is going to be collected from secondary sources, while primary sources are going to be used to collect data during semi-structured interviews with staff, board members, funders, and supporters. The data will be analysed according to several propositions about the factors that contribute to differential project outcomes.

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