EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE OF MOSQUES IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Community-based organizations (CBOs), including faith-based organizations (FBOs), are increasingly assuming greater roles in addressing social issues at local level all over the world. Mosques are institutions of critical social importance because they are at the same time a place for spiritual devotion and a centre for community development. Malaysia is a leading Muslim country and its mosques are expected to exhibit the performance of comprehensive roles which mosques in other parts of the world can take as a model. In line with this expectation, the proposed study aims at exploring the role of mosques at a Malaysian locality in community engagement and development. The focus of the survey is to find out if the respondents attribute their consciousness of pressing social issues and their participation in community development activities to the lectures and speeches they listen to in mosques. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the information obtained from these sources will be performed to identify and categorize the role of the selected mosques. The overall outcome of the proposed study is expected to increase our understanding of the current community development role of Malaysian mosques and offer insight for policy initiatives towards broadening and deepening this role where necessary.

Keywords Community-based organizations, faith-based organizations mosque, spiritual development.

1. Introduction

No society can claim to be free from all problems. Obesity, substance abuse (e.g. alcoholism, smoking, and drug addiction), illiteracy, sexual harassment and sexual assault, divorce and single parenthood, suicidal death, reckless driving and accident, poverty, environment and air pollution, and natural disaster are some of the problems of contemporary societies. Government of a country is usually either lauded or criticized for how it deals with various social problems for offering its people a comfortable and pleasing living condition. Dealing with multifarious social problems is a task that places a costly and heavy burden on a government. This burden is lessened when a government is supported by organizations which are capable of attacking and arresting many social problems at local and community level.

In fact, community-based organizations (CBOs) are increasingly assuming greater roles in addressing social issues at local level throughout the contemporary world. This trend in western societies gains
momentum particularly because of economic downturn which impels many governments to slash
government expenditure. An evidence of this is British government’s policy of “Big Society” which
implies “turning government upside down by returning decision making to the local, ‘nano’ level”
(McCabe, 2010). Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are a special kind of CBOs that include, inter alia,
churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples. Despite the secular nature of the western
governments which demands separation of church and state affairs, FBOs are getting recognition
and importance in partnering with governments for delivering social services. “Instead of wary
adversaries, government and faith based organizations are encouraged to be complements to each
other where the personal relationships of inspired believers cultivated by faith based organizations
are harnessed to reach people where government dollars for standardized bureaucratic government
prescriptions implemented by expert university trained social workers do not.” (Roger Morton, 2001)

Undoubtedly, mosques are institutions of critical social importance because they are at the same
time a place for Ḍuḥūrah or spiritual devotion and a centre for community engagement and
development. A Comprehensive role of a mosque entails its functions to be directed towards
fulfilling both spiritual and physical needs of the members of the community in which it operates.
When FBOs assume greater role in generally known secular countries like the USA, how do mosques
in the contemporary Muslim world perform their role is a question of greater interest because Islam
negates the separation of religious and worldly affairs. Detailed study on the mosques from the
perspective of community development is imperative to generate information and insight to address
this question. Malaysia is a leading Muslim country and its mosques are expected to exhibit the
performance of comprehensive role which mosques in other parts of the world can take as a model.
Malaysian mosques are thus deemed suitable for an exploration of mosque’s social engagement and
developmental role in the Muslim world.

2. Objective of the study

The objective of the study is primarily aim at studying the functions, programs and practices of
Malaysian mosques which directly or indirectly contribute for community development. The specific
objectives are thus outlined as follows:

a. To find out how social problems and needs are addressed by the mosque;
b. To understand and explain the mosque’s voluntary and/or directed
participation in activities which enhance a community’s social health; and
c. To discuss what initiative could be taken to enhance the mosque’s
performance on social developmental issues.

3. Sample and Collection method

This exploratory study will collect information from multiple sources by employing various methods.

a. From five (5) selected mosques, lectures and speeches during a full month
will be recorded and transcribed for content analysis.
b. Existing programs and practices of ten (10) selected mosques will be
reviewed. Committees of these mosques will be interviewed face-to-face
for understanding their thought of the mosque’s social role and the future
planning for its performance.
c. Around two hundred (200) muṣallūn, (persons who perform ṣalāt) who
listen to the lectures and speeches, will be selected from twenty (20)
mosques for questionnaire survey.
4. Finding

Finding no.3a – lectures and speeches

Out of twenty eight (28) talks transcribed, thirteen (13) talks transcribed from five (5) rural mosques and fifteen (15) from four (4) town mosques it is observed that speakers dealt with six (6) main topics. They are

a. parenting,

b. poverty,

c. health,

d. family disintegration,

e. character building and

g. global citizenship behaviour.

Finding no.3b – interviews

In the selected 10 mosques the main issues highlighted in the interviews are of six (6) types, as mentioned in Table 1:

Table 1 - Actions towards solving social issues as reported by mosque committee members during interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>a. Actions towards solutions (as reported by mosque committee members during interviews)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Free mixing, Adultery, Baby dumping</td>
<td>b. Organize outdoor activities by residents surrounding; doing rounds with Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (JAIS).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. We formed khalwat squad; upon report we checked, advised, police report, court case</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Organized talks to motivate people of the importance of virtuous deeds for the purpose of soul purification.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>e. We have a counselling group among retired teachers to give voluntary services to our community</td>
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<td></td>
<td>f. Have meeting with the college authority and students and having joint venture programs with them</td>
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<td></td>
<td>g. We have our community department to handle such cases. The babies were sent to the Welfare Department for adoption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Theft/robbery</td>
<td>a. Organize outdoor activities by residents surrounding; doing rounds with Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (JAIS).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Organized business carnival – to foster relationship between the members of the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. We set a committee to nab the thief (one successful case was reported). We also have a duty roaster to oversee surrounding areas. Members do their daily checking/round</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Engage security personal to check theft issues in particular during Maghrib and Isha’ prayers.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>e. Installed close circuit television (CCTV) to oversee the theft cases and police report</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.i Truancy/School dropouts</td>
<td>a. Program for families to get to know their neighbours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. We organize program – motivation for teenagers during school holidays so that they are occupied with useful activities.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
activities.
c. We appoint counsellor (among the retiree) to give advise to parents and children concern
d. Invite people especially the youngsters to joint programs organized by the mosque so that they do not feel being alienated by society.

3.ii School bullying
a. We organize program – motivation for teenagers during school holidays so that they are occupied with useful activities.
b. We appoint counsellor (among the retiree) to give advise to parents and children concern
c. Invite people especially the youngsters to joint programs organized by the mosque

3.iii Vandalism
a. Committee members to look into the matter, give advice, organized programs related to vandalism
b. We organize program – motivation for teenagers during school holidays so that they are occupied with useful activities.
c. We appoint counsellor (among the retiree) to give advise to parents and children concern
d. Installing CCTV
e. Invite people especially the youngsters to joint programs organized by the mosque so that they do not feel being alienated by society.

3.iv Motoring among teenagers (merempit)
a. Due to the frequent patrolling among the mosque committee members, advice given during khutbah on Friday and collaboration of program with authorities-JAIS.

3.v Loitering
a. Program for families to get to know their neighbours
b. We have a counselling group among retired teachers to give voluntary services to our community

3.vi Smoking
a. We appoint counsellor (among the retiree) to give advise to parents and children concern

4 Divorce
a. Mostly cases on divorce we will give advice to the parties involve and then they were referred to Shari‘iah court for further counselling. Form a bureau to give advice (tawliyah-conferrred the right to advise) to couples having problems, misappropriate behaviour and divorce

5 Cheating/bribery
a. Reporting to Anti-corruption agency
b. Social arbitration

6 Silr
a. Our able officers were made busy to assist the victims to overcome their problems

From the table 1, the issue on teenager is given the highest attention by all mosques. And the mosques also have contributed in solving the problems related to teenagers.

**Finding no.3c – survey**

The results obtained from the survey conducted supplement the above finding. A total of 200 musallūn from 20 mosques participated in the survey. Male were 57% and female 43%. The respondents fairly represented different age groups. Youths (up to 30 years old) were 38%;
respondents in the prime of their life (31-50 years) were 32%; and the rest 30% were elderly people (above 50).

In terms of education, 30% of them have either first degree or master degree; 28% have diploma and the rest 42% have secondary school education. One-third (33%) of the respondents attended lectures/discussion at the mosque every day; 21% attended only once a week; around one-third (32.6%) attended 2 to 3 times a week and the rest (13.4%) of them attended 4 to six times a week. Less than 10% of the respondents reported that they had taken part in some outdoor activities or social programs organized by their mosques.

The respondents were provided a list of 20 social issues and requested to report (by saying yes or no) if they had heard about these issues in the lectures/discussions organized by their mosques.

Table 2 shows these social issues in a descending order according to the percentage of the respondents affirming the hearing of these in the lectures. As can be seen in the table, ten (10) of these issues have been heard by more than 50% of the respondents. Excepting the obesity, which ranked the lowest, other issues were also reported heard by good number of respondents ranging from 29.1% to 48.3%. These findings reveal that Malaysian mosques are cognizant of contemporary social issues and put effort, through organizing lectures and discussions, to make people conscious of these issues.

Table 2: Social issues addressed by lectures/discussions arranged in Mosques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Issues</th>
<th>% of respondents heard</th>
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<th>% of respondents heard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Smoking</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>11 Environment/air pollution</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Natural disaster</td>
<td>59.4%</td>
<td>12 Unhealthy foods and drinks</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Free-mixing</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>13 Bullying</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Divorce</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
<td>14 Suicidal death</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 General (physical) health issues</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>15 Reckless driving and accident</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Drug addiction</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>16 Single parenthood</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Sexual harassment/sexual assault</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>17 Littering</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Neighbour’s right</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>18 Louder music</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Alcoholism</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>19 Household waste disposal</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Poverty</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
<td>20 Obesity</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Does listening to the lectures/discussion at the mosques increase knowledge and consciousness of the respondents about the social issues? The respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement (Scale: 1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=disagree; 4=strongly disagree) with five (5) items reflective of social importance and interest. The mean score of their responses (1.58), well below 2.00, is an affirmation that lectures and discussions organized by mosques help them becoming conscious about contemporary social issues.

Then the next important question was to explore - does listening to the lectures/discussion at the mosques encourage them to take part in activities having social and communal benefits? Here again their responses to five (5) social items resulted in a mean score of 1.64 which acknowledged the encouraging role mosques perform for the people to take part in beneficial social activities. However, the consciousness and encouragement have not led many to actually be active in mosque-initiated social programs and activities. Less than 10% of the respondents reported that they had taken part in some outdoor activities or social programs organized by their mosques.

To further explicate the role of mosque in Community Development particularly in mosque’s voluntary and or directed participation in activities the following table 3 summarized the events.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaboration: Mosques cooperating with/having partnership with-seeking assistance from other organizations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Collaborate with University, companies like IKRAM, SME, Pusat Zakat Selangor, etc. for programs (Masjid UPM, Masjid Asyshakirin)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Mosque initiatives – organize outdoor activities by residents surrounding; doing rounds with Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (JAIS). (Masjid UPM)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. We also collaborated with other mosque to organize program, for example talk on religion -which we have it at Jalan Kuar, Kuala Lumpur. (Masjid Al Azim)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. In economic activities we organized carnival in collaboration with Lembaga Zakat Selangor. Here we invited all people to be listen to health talk, selling their products, junk sale/ car boot sale, talks for spiritual development and also giving donation to the needy. The purpose of those programs were to invite people to perform salat in congregation, to strengthen the ukhuwah, to provide platform for knowledge sharing. (Masjid Bukit Indah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. We organized various programs such as Mawlid al-Rasul with the Acehnese society, janāzah courses for youths, health care and wellbeing for people in collaboration with Hospital Sg Buloh. (Masjid Baru Sungai Buloh)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Members do their daily checking/round (based on duty roster during night times in collaboration with JAIS (Masjid Jameah Assolehah, Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Aziz, Masjid Ehsaniah, Masjid Hasanah, Masjid Al-Taqwa, Masjid Jamek Kajang)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. To overcome the problem of free-mixing among genders – we have meeting with the college authority and students and having joint venture programs with them (Masjid Al-Firdaus)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Economic ventures such as book selling, offering certificate courses for public, shop lots for rent, one off programs – circumcision, motivation course, horse-riding course, marriage course, (Masjid Al-Falah, Masjid Kota Damansara, Masjid Sungai Buloh, Masjid Al-Ghuran)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 depicts the collaboration of mosques in communal activities with agencies such as Pusat Zakat Selangor, Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, Universities, hospital. The collaboration relates to activities such as knowledge sharing through talks and lectures. This strengthen relationship among the community members with the other bodies and it is further reinforced by organizing business carnival, certificate courses for public, marriage courses, motivation trainings for teenager. These activities are indeed of two-prong objectives; not only as a platform for community members to get to know each other but also yield some amount of income for the participants.

The spiritual development then could further be enhanced with the act of giving ṣadaqah to the needy – “walk the talk” (in modern saying) which Qur’ān in verses 2 and 3 of Sūrat al-Ṣāff enquire – why do you say but do not do? The teenagers as well are being properly taken into consideration with all kinds of motivational trainings organized for them. Hence their free times are wisely occupied with positive and beneficial activities.

From the above discussion it is noted that mosque plays an important role in community development. Not only it contributes to spiritual enrichment it also provides a platform for nurturing and developing good character for all as well as a base for economic activities. However, the role of mosque can be further enhanced by highlighting the current issues such as peaceful coexistence with the non-Muslim society.

In the present study it is observed Masjid UPM and Masjid al-Azim have mentioned and to certain extent created awareness of the importance of the concept of Muhibbah (peaceful coexistence with others). In the talks transcribed from the two mosques few points are observed, stated in the following.

1. Mosques must play a role in providing platform for discussion on religious tolerance
2. Invite scholars to explain:
   a. the meaning of religious tolerance,
   b. history of religious tolerance,
   c. impact of religious tolerance
   d. Prophetic approaches to religious tolerance
   e. Action guides to practice religious tolerance
3. Dialogue with the non-Muslims
4. Organize programs such as:
   a. Know your neighbours – Muslim and non-Muslims
   b. Learn to respect others

Ultimately the above suggestions may pave ways to nurture the spirit of Muhibbah for today, it dissipates with the influence of materialistic gain at whatever cost thus leads to disrespecting others. Indeed the correct Islamic approach towards the non-Muslims is to assume that all of them have, as yet, not been properly convinced about the authenticity of the divine origins of the teachings of Islam. The events of today, projecting Muslims as terrorists aggravates the matter. And mosques must play her role to explain this issue. And it is for the Muslims to help the non-Muslims to appreciate the truthfulness of the Islamic teachings. That would require not only intelligent da`wah on their part as akh fi al-din (brother in [same] religion) but, perhaps more importantly, a behaviour of respect for the fellow human beings (akh fi al-ṭîn – brother in humanity), irrespective of their faith. The absence of that behaviour on the part of some Muslims has been an important reason for their failure to present Islam as a message which is worthy of being taken seriously by the non-Muslims.
5. Conclusion and future recommendation

The explorative study on the role of Malaysian mosques in community development undoubtedly prove to us that Malaysian mosques play a very significant position. This position could be clearly seen in various studies on the lectures and speeches, interviews and activities conducted on mosques in Selangor. From the studies one observed that the role of mosque which duly known as a centre of Ñibâdah is indeed extended to be a vital avenue for discussion, talk and lecture among people, a platform for collaboration between the mosques and that of governmental and non-governmental agencies and a certified training centre for imam – taftiz, marriage courses, slaughtering courses, janâzah management, motivational trainings for teenagers, even income provider for the seekers.

In other words, with this findings it is observed that Malaysian mosques are practicing dual roles, that is uphold one’s relationship with Allâh (labl min al-Allâh) and excercising man’s mundane affairs (labl min al-nâs). Indeed this role precides in the teaching of Qur’ân:

Allâh says: “O you who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the remembrance of Allâh, and leave off business (and traffic): That is best for you if you but knew! And when the prayer is finished, then may you disperse through the land, and seek of the bounty of Allâh. And celebrate the praises of Allâh often (and without stint): that you may prosper.”
(Sûrat al-Jumûnah, 62:9-10).

This verse clarifies that activities (e.g., business, trade etc.), although regarded as general act of Ñibâdah, is to be stopped once there is a call for performing Friday prayer. Allâh promises eternal success and bounty to those who abide by His command and prioritize His calling above work and worldly profit. Although man is prohibited from performing any activity during the Friday prayer time, he is allowed to engage in any productive and beneficial activities after the Friday prayer is over.

The similar tone is addressed in verse 77 of Sûrat al-Qaṣâs: “...but seek through that which Allâh has given you, the home of the hereafter and yet do not forget your share of the world....” The verse aptly called for applying the concept of balance (wasl) in life; searching for life in the hereafter and this world. And from the above finding the mosques in Malaysia, generally applied this conception – searching for excellence in the hereafter by practicing excellent work in this worldly life – living according to fiḍrah and striving for sirāl al-mustaqîm (the true path).

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References


