



Praxis Note No. 48

# Capacity Building and Islamic FBOs: Insights from Malawi

by Nabila Saddiq

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**INTRAC**  
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Islamic FBOs are not well understood. Until recently they have been largely ignored in the development discourse. But they are now playing a significant role in development. If external stakeholders are to engage productively with Islamic FBOs, they need to develop their understanding and appreciation of them.

To begin to do this, and identify the implications for capacity building, in 2006 INTRAC commissioned a short, applied research project. Ten Islamic FBOs in Malawi were analysed. This provides a useful comparative paper to Praxis Note 47 which reflected on 'Organisational development (OD) with Christian FBOs' in the same country context.

This paper briefly examines the history of Muslims and Islamic FBOs in Malawi. It then assesses the work done by Islamic NGOs, their modus operandi and their attitude to working with non-Islamic organisations. The research reveals that the organisational behaviour of Islamic FBOs is not predictable on the basis of religion alone and depends upon interpretations of religion, which in turn are influenced by the cultural and educational background of an organisation's leadership. The research also found that Islamic FBOs have had only limited engagement with capacity building to date. The research concludes by highlighting the implications for working with Islamic FBOs on capacity building and OD.

## Islam and development in Malawi

### Access challenges with Islamic FBOs

Many responding FBOs were suspicious of the motives for this research. This was due to an incident in 2006 when the CIA arrested four prominent members of the Muslim community, all of whom worked in charitable organisations. They were removed from their homes and the country with no prior warning or explanation (see [www.afrol.com/articles/11059](http://www.afrol.com/articles/11059)). Outsider organisations such as INTRAC were therefore viewed as potentially hostile by many Islamic FBOs. However, by using a researcher from within the Muslim community, all the FBOs interviewed eventually agreed to co-operate.

The first Muslim Association of Malawi was founded in 1942 and set up madrassah schools (Islamic schools) which provided religious and some secular education. Otherwise, there was no prolific development activity by Muslims or Islamic organisations. Racial segregation of communities during colonial rule proved an impediment to the ability of Muslims to organise, as did the lack of foreign donors willing to finance development work for Muslims.

Those interviewed believed strongly that missionary organisations used their links with the colonial government to provide educational and relief services. The control of education by Christian organisations resulted in conversions of Muslims to Christianity as well as leaving the Muslim population much less educated than their Christian counterparts.

This perceived discrimination is an important element in the emergence of Islamic FBOs in

Malawi. Muslims began developing education and relief projects in the 1970s. This was encouraged by the increasing financial prosperity of Asian Muslims in Malawi and by post-independence interest from the international Muslim community. Middle Eastern countries, notably Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were concerned about conversions from Islam to Christianity and a great number of mosques were constructed around the country.

Most activity of Islamic FBOs at this time was based around religious education and *da'wa* (the preaching of Islam) in an attempt to halt conversions to Christianity. This concern continues today. The perceived missionary threat remains significant, although many have branched out into health care, education and micro-finance.

Islamic FBOs are not as large or developed as Christian FBOs in Malawi. Christian FBOs have been around much longer and are supported by a number of international Christian organisations with a field presence in Malawi. There were no international Islamic FBOs with a permanent office in Malawi until 2005.

## Faith and development for Islamic FBOs

Most Islamic FBOs do not have a formal relationship with an institution such as the mosque or *jamaat* (congregation) and reach out directly to the community. This contrasts with many of their Christian counterparts in Malawi (an important organisational issue explored in depth in Praxis Note 47), Islam as a religion is not as hierarchical in organisation as Christianity and this is reflected in the freedom of Islamic FBOs from the mosque or *jamaat*. Many Islamic FBOs in Malawi are set up by the desire of individuals, particularly those from the business community with a disposable income, to do good. However, this results in an ad-hoc emergence, contributing to the lack of coordination between Islamic FBOs.

## Charity in Islam

Charity is a crucial concept in the Islamic faith; it is one of the five fundamental pillars of Islam and hence a compulsory duty upon all Muslims. There are two forms of charity in Islam; *zakat* which is compulsory and *sadaqa/lillah* which is voluntary. *Zakat* is an annual contribution of 2.5% of income to public welfare, and is the largest source of funding for Islamic FBOs in Malawi. Islam lays a strong emphasis on the duty of the rich to support the poor and the divide between rich and poor Muslims in Malawi is a stark one. One common reason given by Asian Muslims for their support of charity work is “look how much we have compared to them”. There is also a cultural belief that giving to charity is a way to avert the ‘evil eye’ on one’s successful business or home life.

## The definition of development

Not all Islamic FBOs had a view on a preferred Islamic theory of development. They tend to see development work as anything that assists the poor and provides them with relief – a quite welfarist approach. Assisting the poor is not only confined to economic needs but spiritual needs as well. In fact, the imparting of religious knowledge is at times seen as more urgent than economically uplifting communities. Some believe that once people start understanding and following Islam, they will immediately be on the path to renewal in all aspects of life. As with Christian FBOs, development is seen in holistic terms. Their definitions of poverty will include issues such as spiritual deprivation and cultural impoverishment. Indeed, many Islamic FBOs see these as a principal cause of the HIV and AIDS problem. They believe a lasting solution to AIDS lies in a religious solution.

Nine of the ten FBOs prioritised education (both religious and secular). Lack of education is regarded as the root of most social and economic problems for Malawians. It is also seen as the reason for the under-development of Muslims compared to Christians. Most Islamic FBOs in Malawi have their own educational institutions.

The largest engaged in education provision, the Islamic Zakat Fund (IZF), provides scholarships to Muslims in secondary schools and in higher education. IZF considered education to be imperative to development, based on the first command to the Prophet being to read.

Other areas of work were food relief, healthcare and to a lesser extent income generating and social empowerment programmes.

## Working with other groups

The Muslim community in Malawi can be broadly split into two categories; Sunni and Tablighi. These definitions are employed by the community but are not completely logical as Tablighis are also from the Sunni sect in Islam. Sunnis and Tablighis do not represent distinct schools of thought but rather different traditions of practice on certain issues. Sunnis openly revere the prophet Muhammad more than Tablighis. Sunnis focus more on spirituality, whereas Tablighis are regarded as being more literal in their practice. The Sunni/Tablighi split is approximately 50/50 amongst Malawian Muslims, and a family often has members from both. The divide is not so great that it prevents groups from cooperating, but Islamic FBOs in Malawi tend to identify with one or the other and are staffed accordingly. There were no obvious organisational differences or views on development between the groups.

Most groups expressed no strong reservations to working with Christian or secular development agencies. Those involved in humanitarian work and who were looking to develop more professionally as organisations were more willing to actively engage in working with non-Muslim groups. There appears to be a positive relationship between the level of organisational effectiveness and professionalism and desire to work with non-Muslim organisations, though the direction of causality is not clear.

No Islamic FBOs, with the exception of Munazzamat Dawa Islamia (MDI), had received funding from donor agencies. Most had not

attempted due to perceived discrimination in favour of Christian FBOs. Those who tried were continuously unsuccessful. One organisation complained that Christian FBOs are not quizzed as to their sources of funding and are trusted more by donor agencies than Islamic FBOs. But others felt it was because many Islamic FBOs in Malawi do not make huge efforts to reach non-Muslims or engage in general humanitarian work for the benefit of all.

Perceived favouritism of Christian FBOs by donors and competition between the faiths has stifled the ability of inter-faith development efforts. However, this arises more from historical circumstances than any theological impediments.

## Organisational features of Islamic FBOs

### Identity

Most Islamic FBO identify themselves with their faith and list this as the primary motivation for this existence. However, Islamic FBOs which did not follow the dominant Sunni/Tablighi philosophy defined themselves as 'inspired by faith to be good humans and work for all humanity, not primarily the faith group'. This illustrates how different understanding or traditions in Islam can have a strong impact upon organisational development. The Gift of the Givers Foundation which is inspired by Sufism, an Islamic tradition focusing on spirituality and mysticism (found largely in Turkey as well as the sub-continent) states:

'We actively seek to build bridges between people of different cultures and religions, engendering goodwill, harmonious coexistence, tolerance and mutual respect in keeping with the divine injunction.'

The Bedir Educational Medical Foundation Trust is run by Turkish Muslims inspired by a Turkish theologian who strongly preaches humanist values and inter-faith tolerance and cooperation. The school they run is supported by local pastors and is completely secular, with no religious

instruction and no discrimination between Muslim and non-Muslim students.

Surprisingly perhaps, the Muslim Women Organisation in Malawi, run by Malawian women, used faith to define and guide its vision more than the others. Although Islam can be (mis)used to marginalise women in many societies, here it played a positive and inspiring role for women. Members spoke of religion giving them the status and confidence of belonging to something worthwhile and the motivation for walking miles to attend meetings despite domestic and work commitments.

## Strategy

A strategy which unites the human development needs of beneficiaries with the practical ability of the organisation to deliver is essential for effective development interventions. However, many Islamic FBOs in Malawi are weak in this area. They fail to achieve their objectives due to lack of professionalism and good management.

Islamic teachings plays an important role in the setting of organisational objectives and this is discernible by the mission statements of Islamic FBOs (most have them).

Munazzamal Dawa Islamia (MDI) has a Quranic verse on the path to Islam as its mission statement. All the objectives are focused on the personal, moral and intellectual development of Muslims in line with Islamic teachings. The Islamic Zakat Fund focuses on the religious importance and role of zakat and spending these funds according to Islamic principles

However, most mission statements emphasise humanitarian assistance to all Malawians not just Muslims.

The two Malawian-led Islamic FBOs, the Muslim Association of Malawi and the Muslim Women Organisation, had a stronger element of social empowerment than the Asian-led FBOs. These organisations also appeared more open to working with government, highlighting the

historical insecurity of Asian Muslims to engage in politics.

## The role of zakat

An important strategic challenge for Islamic FBOs in Malawi is the role of zakat. Zakat as a charity tax is obligatory upon all Muslims (and is the largest source of funding for most Islamic FBOs) and traditionally in Malawi beneficiaries of zakat must be Muslim (though some recent interpretations are more inclusive).

Most Muslims also prefer to pay zakat during the month of Ramadan for food relief as the rewards are considered to be higher at this time. FBOs, however, require steady funding around the year. Famines do not necessarily coincide with Ramadan. Another common practice is to spend zakat on building mosques and teaching Muslims to read the Qu'ran as this is seen as incurring great reward and aiding the spiritual development of Muslims. This however, can be seen as allocating resources away from projects which can materially benefit the lives of Malawians.

It is also unclear whether zakat funding can be used for administrative costs of organisations. If the organisation decides it cannot, this presents an impediment if zakat presents its main resource base. Many organisations find a way around the conditions of zakat money by using non-zakat donations called *lillah* or *sadaqa*. These donations are voluntary and therefore free of stipulations.

Zakat funding is for Muslim beneficiaries only, raising sensitive issues of discrimination. Islamic FBOs in Malawi have dealt with this by having two accounts; zakat and non-zakat and combining funding to ensure non-discrimination against non-Muslims. This issue is more challenging in humanitarian work.

## Role of women

All Islamic FBOs in Malawi were male dominated, with the exception of the women's organisation. Women were employed to

specifically work with women on women's projects but not for central administration or as key project staff. The reason for this was both religious and cultural. Most men in charge of FBOs had strong religious backgrounds and may have felt uncomfortable in such close proximity with women. Most FBO leaders were of an Asian or African Arab background and so were culturally more accustomed to working solely with men.

The lack of female staff and input may affect these organisations' abilities to engage with female beneficiaries. For instance, the Muslim Women's Organisation in Malawi complained that announcements for food distribution were often made in mosques. Widows, with no men-folk to attend the mosque, missed out despite often being the neediest. This organisation also felt that it did not receive much financial support from the International Muslim Council in Khartoum or the Gadaffi-led Union of East, Central and Southern Africa of which they were members, because they were a women's organisation.

Most Islamic FBOs are conscious of women's development and ran female literacy and training projects. One organisation commented that in Islam it was important to educate women because women in turn educate their families. Whether these organisations would be willing to harness concepts of gender and development as posed by the United Nations is unclear. For example, three Islamic FBOs were running sewing and home economics projects for women – a particular approach to women's development that fits within the norms of a patriarchal society.

## **HIV and Aids**

Most organisations expressed willingness to work on HIV and AIDS if it was in their remit. But all agreed that it would have in accordance with the Islamic and not donor approach. The Association of Sunni Madrassahs had devised a lengthy strategy to tackle the problem in the Muslim community in a culturally appropriate way. But the issue of condoms was clear. Abstinence was

regarded as the most effective prevention. Encouraging the use of condoms is seen as promoting promiscuity and immoral behaviour. No Islamic FBOs were willing to support the distribution of condoms.

## **Leadership and culture**

Only two of the ten FBOs interviewed were led by Malawians, with a third organisation (from Turkey) having a Malawian board of trustees. Most Islamic FBOs are led by Asian Muslims with some standing in the business community. Sudanese nationals also featured in leadership of FBOs, having been sent by a foreign based FBO or selected by local FBOs due to their higher levels of education.

Indigenous Malawians are largely marginalised from positions of authority. As Asian Muslims are initially responsible for setting up FBOs, they continue to lead them. There is a definite disinclination to include Malawians on decision making bodies or give them financial responsibility. The chairman on one prominent Islamic FBO said that although he had a very capable Malawian who was more effective than the elder manager of the organisation, he needed the latter to keep an eye on things. The Islamic ideal of trust and equality between Muslims was not strongly practiced.

This highlights long-running animosity between Malawian and Asian Muslims. One Malawian respondent stated: "Before independence, the whites ruled, the Asians developed the economy and the Africans were cheap labour to both. Now the Asians have grown richer but have not improved the conditions of the Malawians and are more racist than whites". Asians in turn feel targeted by Malawians because of their wealth and have significant trust issues. Although Malawians are employed by Asian led Islamic FBOs, their decision-making power is limited.

The leadership style is also generally paternalistic. Many Islamic FBOs see themselves as being able to identify, diagnose and treat the problems of

poor Malawians without necessarily taking them on as equal partners in the process.

In most cases, leadership remained with the founders. Elections were only held in the two representative bodies. Although most leaders were practicing Muslims, they were not always the most knowledgeable religious authority in the organisation, with imams and sheikhs often the subordinates of the leaders.

Spiritual authority is more paramount in jamaat (congregation) organisations such as the Limbe, Blantyre and Zomba Jamaats. The Limbe Jamaat was said not have held elections or had audited accounts in over eight years yet this was not challenged by members. However religious leaders in big representative organisations like Muslim Association of Malawi and Malawian Women's Project wielded some power over the faith community, although their influence may have been undermined by their lack of command over resources.

## Staffing

The lack of quality staff was a common complaint from Islamic FBOs. They felt they could not draw upon a wide pool of educated staff in the same way that Christian FBOs can. Most organisations only had two to three staff and these were frequently from Sudan. One Sudanese-based FBO complained that foreign staff were too expensive, but that working with Malawians had failed. Although the organisation was structured to have five departments, the country manager undertook most work himself, severely restricting the quality of work, implementation of strategies and growth.

Some Islamic FBOs stated that senior staff would have to be Muslim, especially if dissemination of Islam was a key objective. However, most organisations in education work employed more Christian than Muslim teachers and did not see this as a problem.

No Islamic FBO had a development professional on staff, in part because of a lack of Muslims in

this field, who have sacrificed financial benefits for a greater cause.

One respondent also argued that Islamic FBOs in Malawi have not yet grown to the extent that concerns of professionalism and sustainability are paramount. Money spent on staff was seen as better spent directly on beneficiaries. However, FBOs which had been running for some time or who were led by well-educated individuals with a broad outlook on Islam believed in investing in staff and developing systems.

Behavioural expectations of staff varied according to how 'Islamically strict' the organisation was. Sunni and Tablighi organisations expected staff to behave in an Islamic manner at all times, in some cases pray during work and act as role models. One organisation commented that 'if all Muslims had the true Islamic character, they would be the perfect staff.' But he also noted that according to Islam, the best person for the job in question should be selected irrespective of religion, unless religion was key to the job description.

Other organisations expected reasonable behaviour, such as not wearing offensive clothing or drinking on premises. The ease with which a non-Muslim member could fit into an Islamic FBO in Malawi therefore depends upon the specific FBO. Organisations such as Gift of the Givers have more non-Muslim volunteers in its relief operation and endorse working with non-Muslims as part of its philosophy. Others prefer to have a core Muslim staff and most would prefer to employ Muslims where possible.

## Systems

Only six Islamic FBOs are registered with the national body CONGOMA in 2005, despite the existence of a much larger number of Islamic FBOs. This can be partially attributed to lack of organisational formality and development.

The two Malawian-led organisations had the largest and most complex structure. They had a bigger membership than the other Islamic FBOs,

but were the least developed in terms of resources. For example, the Muslim Women's Organisation did not even have an office. Neither organisation receives foreign support or significant support from the Asian community, due to fears about financial management.

Overall, systems and structures were under-developed. Some FBOs were making a concerted effort towards this with objectives, strategic plans and project proposals with clear working. Yet one organisation, which had carried out significant food relief work (almost \$2 million within one year) had no official structure or systems. Volunteers were called at the last minute to meetings and accountability was directly to donors, with food being distributed through mosques or directly in affected areas. A complete volunteer-run operation, this organisation had a cohort of younger members from the Asian Muslim community whose priority was 'get out and help people', not management.

Because Islam encourages discretion when giving charity and because business people do not want others to be able to calculate their net wealth, it is sensitive for an Islamic FBO to officially record the particulars of their zakat income. This raises transparency issues.

Businessmen running Islamic FBOs often use the business imperative to 'just get things done' without the bureaucratic necessities. The under-development of systems and structures in FBOs can detract from the good work and prevent it from functioning optimally.

The weakness of systems and structures is also an impediment to securing funding from donor agencies. The Muslim Association of Malawi reported that DFID sent a letter to Islamic FBOs a few years ago explaining that it was difficult to work with them due to their lack of organisation and transparency.

## Resources

Zakat funding forms a significant resource for most Islamic FBOs in Malawi with lillah and

sadaqah funding also playing an important role. These contributions pour in regularly but growth of Islamic FBOs means that more groups have to vie for this funding. Concerns over corruption led to foreign funding being pulled away from the Muslim Association of Malawi to organisations initiated directly by donors. Some organisations have an established relationship with individual donors and the board of trustees is very often the biggest donor. Educational organisations are making steps towards sustainability through fees. For example, the Islamic Zakat Fund has secured part funding to develop Maone Park, (Malawi's largest industrial estate) into a self financing vocational skills centre amongst other things.

There is competition over resources; the Muslim Association of Malawi felt that being the largest organisation, zakat funding should go to them and that other Islamic FBOs were encroaching on their territory. FBOs without business or foreign backing, like the Muslim Association of Malawi and the Muslim Women's Organisation, have a weak resource base, despite their size. Others are finding zakat and personal contributions insufficient to meet demand, signalling a possible move towards greater attempts in accessing donor agency funding.

## Conclusion

Islamic FBOs in Malawi provide a significant contribution to development work in Malawi. However they still have much work to do in terms of building organisational effectiveness.

It is difficult to speak generically about 'Islamic' FBOs because the Islamic element of their identity is not always the best basis for predictive behaviour analysis. This research has shown that the leadership's understanding of religion is contingent upon their level of education, their ethnicity, and the religious traditions they follow. This in turn informs their vision of development and mode of operation. Islamic FBOs based in the UK such as Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief, operate differently to Malawian ones because they are governed by different socio-economic variables.



There are of course commonalities, for instance policies on HIV and AIDS, expected standards of behaviour at work and rulings on the spending of zakat funds. Islam also emphasises support to widows and orphans and so many Islamic FBOs around the world including Malawi, support these groups regardless of their area of development.

Although Islamic FBOs in Malawi need to develop more effective organisational systems, the strong support of the Muslim community and the local sources of their funding are good signs of sustainability. The business background of many leaders is also an advantage at times due to the elimination of waste often associated with 'NGO culture.' However, the split between Asian and Malawian Muslims at leadership level is an area requiring redress.

Engaging in inter-faith dialogue and joint working with Christian organisations can be a productive exercise if it breaks down distrust and competition between organisations, thereby eliminating duplication of services. Working with donor agencies is a challenge facing both Islamic FBOs and the agencies themselves and it is important for agencies to illustrate to Islamic FBOs that there is no conscious marginalisation of them. Islamic FBOs in turn need to work towards building organisations which can manage donor programmes which require auditable accountability.

## Capacity building and OD with Islamic FBOs

A clear finding from the research was the lack of explicit capacity building undertaken by Islamic FBOs in Malawi. Certainly in a low trust environment, working with Islamic FBOs on internal organisational issues is highly sensitive. This paper has highlighted a number of capacity issues to explore:

- Interpretation of Islamic theology and how it affects development strategy (e.g. welfare or empowerment) and choice of beneficiaries (use of zakat money)

- Leadership ethnicity and education
- Staff nationality and professionalism
- Systems for accountability and planning.

Faith is highly integrated in Islamic FBOs in Malawi. Islamic FBOs have religious leadership within themselves. They use faith to build their capacities by using it as a means to attract volunteers and low paid staff. Most importantly they raise money on the basis of faith and are obliged to spend this money in accordance with faith principles.

Capacity building with Islamic FBOs needs to be done in a way that gains trust and respect, particularly in such an uncertain environment. Religious and cultural sensitivity is imperative. One Islamic FBO stated that 'we will work with anyone as long as we don't have to compromise our beliefs'. Secular Western development methods and values may be seen to conflict with the identity of Islamic FBOs.

A key to good OD practice with Islamic FBOs rests on understanding their faith identity. Many Islamic FBOs and Muslim individuals felt that their faith was not understood by non-Muslims. It is essential therefore, for capacity builders with Islamic FBOs to develop a good understanding of faith. This helps ensure the client feels that practitioners are in touch with their needs and can offer credible advice. Showing sensitivity for dress codes, male/female interactions, and prayer times when arranging meetings are important. Familiarity with concepts such as zakat and the use of hadith (teachings of prophet) also help. They are ways of gaining the trust of the Islamic FBO and communicating more effectively with them.

These recommendations resonate strongly with good practice principles for working with churches as explored in Praxis Note 47 on 'OD with Christian FBOs in Malawi'. Understanding and working with faith identity is clearly critical in effective capacity building of FBOs of any faith.