

From Above, but Bottom up: Faith Based Solidarity Initiatives in the City

In many countries national and municipal authorities increasingly recognise the importance of bottom-up solidarity initiatives in building a care system operating in closer proximity to their citizens. However, governments also struggle to adequately capture the field of actors currently providing these forms of support and care. Faith-based solidarity initiatives (FBSIs) are prominent among these actors, as they often go beyond restrictive rights-based criteria in their aid work and provide care to those most in need. Yet they often struggle to get recognised as actors that play an essential role in the welfare system. This paradox is both embedded in and sustained by the welfare system and its instruments. Our paper draws on perspectives from sociology, social work and religious studies to explain how this paradox affects the identities and practices of FBSIs. We focus on the interactions between welfare state actors and FBSIs in the urban context of five Flemish cities. By analysing how FBSIs perceive (1) subsidies from the municipalities and (2) the impact of (local) social maps - two instruments used by governments in their interactions with solidarity organisations, and constitutive for the struggle for recognition of FBSIs. Based on interviews and group meetings with representatives of FBSIs and welfare state representatives, we show how social maps and public subsidies pressure FBSIs to adapt to the logic employed by formal actors of the national welfare state. While both instruments are commonly used by governments to recognise and support bottom-up solidarity initiatives, they also fail to recognise faith-based solidarity workers as experts and partners in the welfare system. This lopsidedness limits opportunities for collaboration and complementary, while keeping FBSIs' fruitful practices of care and support unseen and ill-understood. By making this paradox visible we give both municipal governments and faith-based solidarity initiatives the tools for better future collaboration.

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