

Developing Practices in Multicultural Society

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Abstract

Globalization has brought people and cultures closer to one another that affect the aspects of life. It has impact in shaping a multicultural society that consists of various ethnicity, race, class, and gender. Then, multiculturalism has been considered significantly in addressing issues experienced mainly by ethnicities and religious groups. Moreover, it plays an important role in the current global condition in which the world recently becoming closer and inter-dependence.

Therefore, community workers or any helping profession need to work for managing diversity, not just sufficiently celebrating and acknowledging it. Furthermore, social interventions and services at any aspects of life (social, cultural, education, economic and political) should also integrate the notion of diversities and pluralism, shaping the life of multicultural society.

This paper aims to introduce the need for understanding and developing localities multiculturalism as a process that is always contextual, affecting significantly on community organizing and education programs. In discussing the main topic, this paper also focuses on three main frameworks: Islamic perspective and community development theories. These frameworks are used to figure out the challenges or issues existing in the life of communities, with identifying resources and developing a logical framework for community organizing and development as one of interventions to change system and policy.

The paper covers two main points of multicultural society and developing practice in multicultural society. The last point specifically focus on the ideas of localities, mentioned by Ife (2002) and apply it in community work or practice. The discussion of this paper include the questions that want to be answered, followed by the discussion of the two main points, while the last session is conclusion that provides some recommendations for changing policy, improving program and services.

Key words: multiculturalism, Islamic perspective, and community development

A. Introduction

In current era, multicultural society is inevitable as an impact of global development, in which people could easily choose the place they want to live. Transportation and communication systems are among means that make such phenomenon more possible. For instance, the followers of the World's greatest religions (Islam, Christian, Jews, Hinduism, and Buddhism) could

come to live together as one nation, or from mixed cultures that exist in the life of family, community, and society. At this point, the term of culture refers not only to what have been practiced by certain nations, races and ethnicities, also from diverse religious groups. Therefore, when scholars discuss about the issue of multicultural society, the point of religiosity is often embedded in their analysis and discussions.

Islam as one of religions sent by God Almighty to people of different races and nationalities teaches the humans to interact one another. From the verse, mankind has been created into many different races scattered all around the world. It has been stated in verse 107 of *Surah Al-Anbiya'* that the Prophet Muhammad was appointed by God Almighty to spread the world of Islam to the whole of mankind. Of course, the concepts of peace, justice, tolerance, and blessing to all people are among Islamic teachings delivered by the Prophet Muhammad saw.. Furthermore, the nature of spreading the message of Islam is global. Now, we can find Muslim communities living in almost all parts of the world. Islam is based purely and simply on the belief in and submission to Allah, not just founded on the notion of race, nationality, political ideology or class. This reflects a global character of Islam.

However, religious conflicts often occur day by day in forms of clashes among ethnics, races, and religions. Therefore, social workers or those who work in community development practice and other professionals often work daily with a diverse society. They increasingly provide services to clients who have different cultural backgrounds. They work specifically for helping religious groups or diverse communities and contribute significantly to address social problems. Although members of all cultural groups have similar basic needs, the way that they conceive, perceive, and respond to the needs show considerable cross-cultural variability. The service beneficiaries' worldview, values, and beliefs can greatly affect the treatment process and outcome (Ramos & Garvin, 2003). Therefore, social work practices applying cross-cultural

approaches and models are necessary to accommodate cultural variation and achieve cross-cultural applicability.

Considering the importance of multi-cultural understanding and its impact to the life of society, this paper provide a comprehensive discussion focusing on a multicultural society seeing from Islamic perspective and social welfare framework. The first session begin with the explanation of problems that will be discussed throughout all parts of this paper. The second session discusses a multicultural society in the views of Islam. The third provides discussions of debates and challenges of multiculturalism, followed by the fourth that provide analysis of the future actions for helping a multicultural society. Then, this paper will end with a conclusion on the issue of working with a multicultural society.

B. Problems Statement

For a community worker an understanding multiculturalism is necessary to gain broader understanding of the reality within the profession. It also helps obtain an opportunity for personal and professional growth. Therefore, this study focuses on the issue of working with a multicultural driven by four main questions. The questions will be answered by applying Islamic perspective and social welfare framework or community organizing and development approach. Then, the questions are described as follows:

- 1) What is the notion and facts of multicultural society?
- 2) How does community development practice supports the life of multicultural society?

C. Multicultural Society: Islamic Era until Current Age

In Islam, the concept of integrated society was introduced in the Holy Qur'an (Al-Hujurat: 13). From this verse, it is stated clearly that the existence of different pairs, nations and tribes is not a problem, but it is a sign to make them know, connect, and integrate each other. This diversity reflects the greatness of God, not showing superiority of one nation, race, color, or language over another. Humans are created differently as creations of God Almighty (Ar-Rum: 22; Al-Hujurat: 13). Islam rejects any quarrels and disputes among people in society, especially among religious believers. Islam is a religion that maintains peaceful coexistence and integration within a society by putting disputes aside and emphasizing more on the concept of unity and brotherhood (Al- Anfaal: 46).

Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad mentioned in his hadith "*The man who is the most hateful to God is the one who quarrels and disputes most*" (Al-Bukhari, 1998). The Prophet Muhammad did not keep silent about the importance of unity and the danger of division in the society (Abi Daud, 1999). He also gave a serious warning to the people who try to harms any society or community (Muslim, 2003; An-Nasaie, 2002), and emphasizes that the closer man to his God is the one who protected the prosperity of the society (Al-Bukhari, 1998). Regarding the concept of brotherhood, the Prophet explained that brotherhood is not based on faith only, but it is a part and element of the faith. He highlights that Allah is fulfilling the need of a person who willingly fulfill the need of his brothers (Al-Bukhari, 1998).

The scholars have concerns on the

concept of the integration of society. For example, Al-Mawdudi (1982) states that this concept of integrated society is directly and indirectly promoted in Islam since Islam is the only system of life that considers the entire mankind to be a family, binds humans into a fraternity, and establishes a world society or community called *Ummah*. Watt (1991) acknowledge the distinctive marks of Islam, compared with other religions, are the diversity of people who embrace it and a strong feeling of brotherhood and a measure of harmony.

Then, the Prophet Muhammad has shown the importance of integration of society, emphasizing the honor of being different and diverse at that particular time as the perfect reference for mankind, especially Muslims who live in a multi-cultural and multi- religious society. All the efforts in developing Madinan society in terms of social, cultures, economic, and politics should be good example to be practiced in all countries.

The guidance left by the Prophet is sufficient for Muslims and non-Muslims, which can help to create or maintain connectedness and cohesiveness for living peacefully together.

In early period of development, the Prophet Muhammad showed the example of a peaceful multicultural society during his lifetime. Muslims, Jewish, Christians, Magian, and Sabian were the communities that bonded together under one constitution that generally reduces various understandings in many different contexts (Hamisan, et al). Moreover, the situation at that time also was colored by multi cultures and values practiced by various tribes and nations.

Then, Muslims can learn from the history of how the society has been

integrated, starting in *Madinah al-Nabiyy* (city of The Prophet Muhammad) or well-known as *Madinah al-Munawwarah* (a radiant city). Integration can be defined as “the extent to which an individual experiences a sense of belonging to a social group or collectivity by virtue of sharing norms, values, beliefs, etc., which is widely used in various areas (Jary & Jary, 1991). It is also used to depict action or process of integrating economic, politics (Pearsall, 1998), social and education.

Then, the integration of society aims at mutual recognition of group differences for eliminating barriers and impediments that are based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability and age. Then, the concept of integration of society is widely used especially in a plural society that contains diverse and different cultures and backgrounds (Hamisan, et al).

Many of the contemporary debates, particularly in Western Europe and North America on how multiculturalism can be considered as common ground or explored to address issues such as language, identity, dress code, and values. Nye (2007) concluded that the debates are likely to re-evaluate the term of multiculturalism to have a major relevance to the world in which we live now. She added that a clearly education is a very significant place for the development of such common ground, and the educational systems have to contribute positively in all sectors of society. Therefore, it is necessary to develop education or any levels of development’ aspects that will help multicultural communities to be developed and success together.

In current situation in Indonesia have been changed rapidly, affected by people’s movement, interest or

affiliation. Through multiculturalism communities are encouraged to uphold tolerance, harmony, and peace rather than conflict or violence in the flow of social change. The paradigm of multiculturalism is expected to be able to tackle social conflict/s happening today provoked by certain individual or groups.

Thus, the core of multiculturalism is the willingness to accept other groups equally as a whole, regardless of cultural, ethnic, gender, linguistic or religious differences. While the focus of multiculturalism lies in the understanding, accepting, and internalizing of social and cultural differences, conducted by individually, in groups, and/or as a community.

D. Developing Community Practice by Strengthening Localities

Discussing localities owned at multicultural communities might be seen form what has been explained by Jim Ife (2006), as mentioned previously. These points localities – including knowledge, culture, resources, skills, and processes- are important in any efforts to develop and organize communities.

The first point refers local knowledge or wisdom to live in harmony that has been valued and practiced by multicultural communities in their daily lives. For instance, the value of diversities have been implemented, especially by respecting and accepting differences in terms of religiosity and cultural understanding that can enhance peace and harmony and avoid conflicts. These two points of intolerance and injustice are considered as challenges for the life of multicultural communities, which can be discussed as follows: firstly, intolerance might be shown in form of actions such as taking the

extreme form of killing biologically or socially (marginalization) other cultures. To address intolerance is by improving tolerance that will open for a world of (dominant) nation states or culture/s to create peaceful coexistence and for human rights inside the states or protect minorities. Therefore, establishing dialogue among people based on mutual respect and curiosity is needed to enhance active peaceful coexistence. People might see each other and learn other cultures and differences as sources of mutual enrichment. This step is called as engaging across differences (Baumann, 1999; Turner, 1993). It requires participation of all components of society in attempts to challenge context of diversity, learning about and tolerant with other's differences, and engage across the differences.

Secondly, injustice is another challenge in the community life. The domination of certain group/s is easily lead to frustration and angry of marginalized groups. Justice in Islam is similar to the universal concept of justice, which means to be fair and just or placing something in its rightful place. All demands Muslims to be fair and just, including in their treatment of the Non-Muslims at any aspects of life. Then, religious believers especially Indonesian Muslims as the majority of religious groups are expected

to lead for building tolerance, networks and any other efforts to solve social problems, not solely limited their work on the issue of religiosity.

The second point of localities is related to cultures. In fact, cultures are often assimilated with religious teachings or values, as shown mostly by religious communities in Indonesia. Cultural characteristics such as religious practices or distinctive style of dress

identify members of particular ethnic or religious communities. Dress codes associated with particular religions, (e.g., Islam and Orthodox Judaism), have sparked a movement to curtail their use in public schools. Furthermore, cultural identifiers also include rules that govern marriage and other forms of social connection.

Furthermore, Nash (1998) distinguishes three core elements of ethnicity form 'surface feature' characteristic including clothing preferences, speech patterns, behavioral styles, physical characteristics, housing locations and types, living arrangements and décor, food items, family and community rituals and celebrations. From these points, an ethnical group could be differentiated from others. They inherit and maintain values that are considered invaluable and appropriate to their lives, from one generation to the next.

The next points of localities consist of resources and skills available at multicultural communities. In community development practice, valuing local resources and skills are crucial to achieve the desirable outcomes. The term resources refer to institutions, individuals, and customs for resolving problems that are indigenous to the client's own community. It is critical that the worker know what these resources are and how they can be used productively.

In addition, the resources contain human and natural resources, infrastructures and public facilities, financial sources, and other forms of social capital (e.g. trust, social bound and solidarity); while any skills to utilize, develop, and sustain the available resources should be integrated in community development works.

The last point is regarding processes in conducting community development that have to respect to the local situation. For example, community workers should know the right time and/or moment that communities prefer to work with the workers. At this point, the workers could not invite the people into an community activity while the people are busy with their routines or ritual – cultural activities. When it happens, the people won't participate in the activity or they might consider the worker has lack of sensitivity and respect to them.

According to Handelman (1976), the ethnically competent community workers ought to encourage people to draw on the natural strengths inherent in their own traditions and communities, reducing where possible their dependence on service provided by outsiders or by impersonal bureaucracies. This last point is crucial in developing community since the people should be more independent and maximizes their own knowledge, resources, and skills.

The next part provides a comprehensive analysis of social issues that possibly emerge at multicultural communities, and how to address these issue by implementing concepts and frameworks deprived from community development theories that consist of social interventions at the levels of individual, family, group, communities, organization and policies. For the purpose of this paper, the analysis is focused more on intervention at mezzo (community and organization) and macro levels (public policies), but provide a brief discussion on micro practices (available for individual, family and group).

F. Conclusion

A community or society needs the best preference as a guideline to live in harmony and peace. The prophet Muhammad provided notable example to his companions for establishing brotherhood, promoting justice, preserving equality and living peacefully condition with communities or group that differ in their religious or cultural backgrounds. Then, Muslims and other religious believers should open their eyes and hearts for differences, applying multiculturalism. Instead of sensing danger when somebody is different let us be filled with the joy at the opportunity to learn, to enrich, and be enriched with comprehensive knowledge and experiences of diverse cultures and social settings.

On the other hand, social workers and other professionals must have a lifelong dedication to increasing knowledge and sensitivity to major multicultural groups, by learning and respecting their values, customs, world views, political history and contributions to humanity.

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