Across much of western Europe rapid change has been imposed in particular by the economic and cultural challenges arising from the 2007 financial crash and mass migration due to war in the Middle East. The effects of these challenges on public trust, often unhelpfully termed ‘crises’ implying chaos, emergency and danger, became patently clear in 2015. European governments struggled to respond convincingly to the pressures of refugee arrival, in particular to Berlin, the geopolitics of terror, in particular in Paris, and record numbers of foodbank users in the UK. In a globalised world, these challenges are interlinked. They are transnational in cause and effect, but they are felt and responded to by people on a very local level. Citizenship and civic engagement are best and most effectively developed and nurtured at the local level rather than through central direction and control.

Author, Institution & source of evidence: I have been employed by The Woolf Institute for the three year Trust in Crisis research project 2015-17 alongside a team of researchers working in Berlin, London, Paris, and Rome. We investigated how a perceived crisis of trust—in, for example, the truth of media news cycles and the ability of the state to provide a brighter future—aFFECTED relations among faith and minority communities. To this end I undertook an ethnographic examination of community-based initiatives engaged in inter-religious and intercultural encounter. I explored how cooperative action and local solidarity were hindered or supported by the perception of crisis in London and Paris.

Over the last decade the Woolf institute has produced high-quality, far-reaching research into important societal issues such as Religion and Belief in British Public Life and End of life care for faith communities. As a continuation of this, the Trust in Crisis research formed part of an ongoing appraisal of public trust by the Woolf Institute, dedicated to the study of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The full report of the research project can be found here: Trust in Crisis.

Initiatives: In London we saw this through the efforts of community-building initiatives in tune with realities on the ground. Notable among these were Pecan, an organisation associated with local churches in Peckham that hosts a foodbank which meets the needs of many local Muslim families. The encounter between a Christian organisation and local Muslims strengthens understanding that local solidarity exists and often transcends religious identity. Similarly multi-faith, the Refugee Welcome group in Lambeth is currently in the process of repurposing part of the South London Liberal Synagogue to house refugees. The culture of hospitality on which this initiative is based underlines core social values explicit in each of the monotheistic traditions. Both of these initiatives build trust at a grassroots level and develop inclusive spaces. They are based primarily on the shared social values of local volunteers but they draw strongly on faith community resources and dovetail with the ethos of their social action.
European comparator: Islamic Relief France provides relief to Paris’s poorest citizens (of all backgrounds) in one of its most difficult neighbourhoods. Though the idea of laïcité (French secularism) is politically prevalent, on the ground realities of austerity mean that local authorities have integrated Islamic Relief as a provider of state assistance.

Finding: Though the challenges of austerity, refugees, and terror can be connected, the way they are experienced is intensely local. In the wake of these challenges, faith groups are becoming more engaged in public life and in responding to crises often show social solidarity before religious exclusivity. These groups are also among the most organised drivers of local level social cohesion. We found that their religiosity and dedication to civic life are not mutually exclusive.

Recommendation: Because of this we would recommend that these forms of emergent religious citizenship that are inclusive and operate at a local level from a sense of empathy with wider transnational crises such as those enumerated in point 2 should be acknowledged and supported.

Nota: These challenges have a particular draw for BME and other minority groups since they relate to for example the social housing of austerity, refugees and migration as a whole, and the police scrutiny associated with counter-terror measures. Minority community involvement is a supplementary factor in the necessity for central government to channel resources towards, promote and reward particularly outstanding individuals key to these local level initiatives.

7. Investment in local structures that are civically engaged has a great impact on the management of the multiple and interlinked challenges of today. Local-level volunteer-led organisations administer provision and confront direct and immediate needs in particularly challenging times, particularly where state institutions are unable to provide. These often draw on the resources of faith groups.

Initiatives: In response to the Grenfell Tower fire the local St Clement’s parish church and the Al-Manaar Mosque served as a hubs for relief work and continue to be sanctuaries for certain Muslim families affected by the fire. In the response to the Finsbury Park attack Rabbi Gluck of the Jewish-Arab forum gave solace and showed cross faith solidarity against the violence of discrimination. Both of these examples made a difference to how people felt and, taking into account misgivings towards local authorities, that local people did care. Using these experiences as a guide, our evidence shows that when public administrations manage and address new challenges, such as multi-faith landscapes, or the integration of migrants, these are more likely to be achieved by integrating civic engagement at a local level with local government.

European comparator: In order to address local authority failure to manage the flow of migrants seeking refugee, one measure Berlin City government took was to create a full-time position responsible for the Dialogue of Religions. This coordinated activities among local faith groups and providing them with platforms for dialogue and exchange.

Finding: The question is not so much how can society support civic engagement but rather what can be done to harness, improve and help pre-existing engagement. Coordination and
communication between faith communities, civil society actors and civic authorities benefits the larger community while providing a tangible form of support to minority groups.

Recommendation: The ad-hoc organisation of post-crisis associations cannot continue to cope without proper investment and structuring. Many providers and users are frustrated by the ongoing lack of state resources. We recommend an increased investment in local-level civil society organisations demonstrating civic engagement either ad-hoc such as after Grenfell or longer term. We also recommend improved coordination with such groups for local structures, especially in times of crisis. Both are vital and can fill the void of resources and care that centralised structures are not always able or willing to fill.

Nota: The Berlin example of a socially minded Dialogue of Religions position has allowed better communication among faith groups and civic authorities. This could also be harnessed to better tackle issues related to violence, discrimination and the integration of refugees as well as enhance responses to long-term effects of austerity.

2 August 2017