

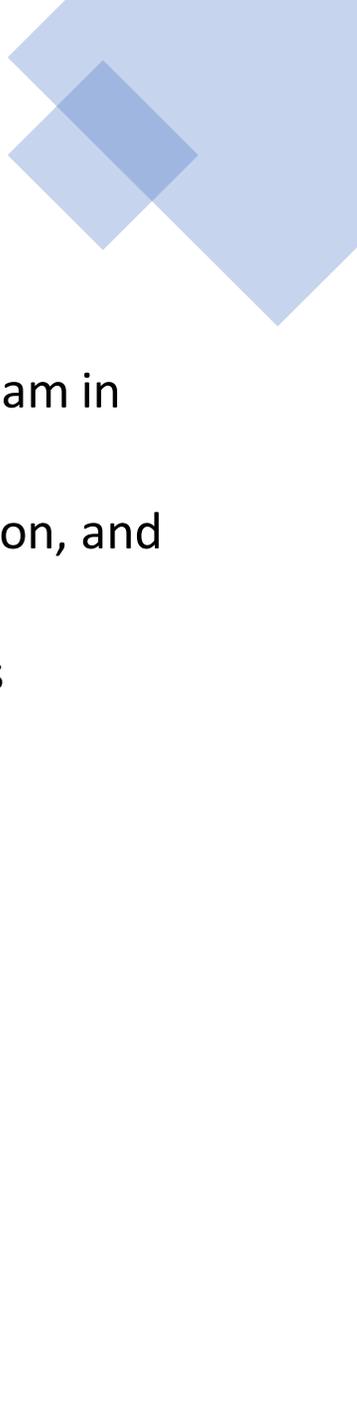
Understanding Your Congregation

Dr Abdul-Azim Ahmed





A bit about me...

- Deputy Director for the Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK at Cardiff University
 - Research on Muslim institutions, communal religion, and civil society.
 - Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Wales
- 



What is social scientific research?

- The study of society, humanity, the human experience, communities, individuals, and the relationships between them.
 - Broad field, but distinct in that the source of information for social scientists is first and foremost people.
 - Compare to historians (records), archeologists (physical remains), *fuqaha* (scripture and Islamic law texts) and so on.
 - The earliest work of social science often attributed to Ibn Khuldun.
- 

Why research your congregation?

اللَّهُمَّ ارِنِي حَقِيقَةَ الْأَشْيَاءِ كَمَا هِيَ

- “O Allah, show me things as they truly are” – a dua of Prophet Muhammad (saw)
- We can often be poor judges of our strengths, abilities, weaknesses and deficits.
- Research helps guide our action, minimise the harms and maximise the benefit.

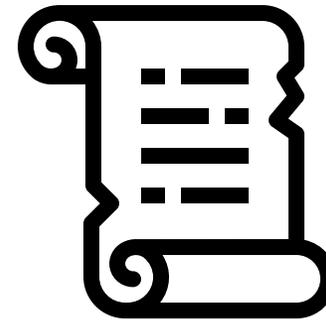
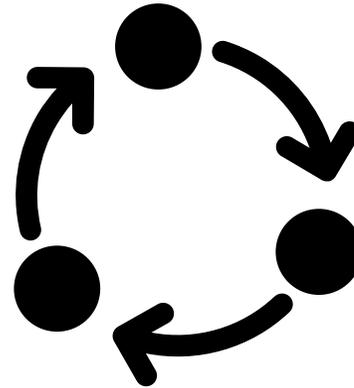
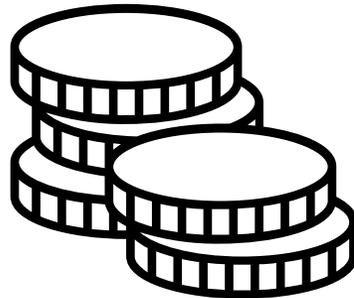
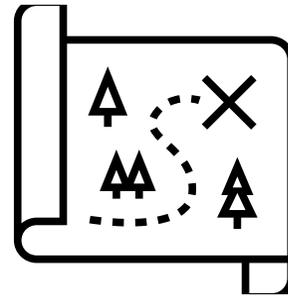
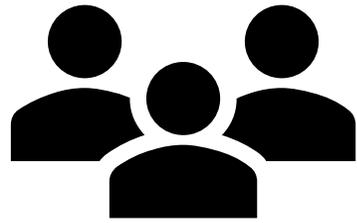


Listening is Leadership

- If you are in a position of authority, you are a leader.
 - The most important skill of leadership is not decisiveness, but listening.
 - Informed, meaningful, relevant, action is only possible through listening.
 - Research allows you to listen rigourously and comprehensively, and avoid our prejudices and biases.
- 
- 

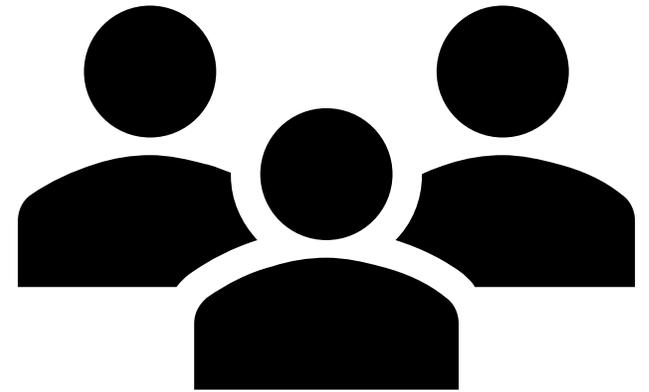
What to study about your congregation?

- The People
- The Ecology
- The Theology
- The Forms
- The Resources
- The Process
- The History



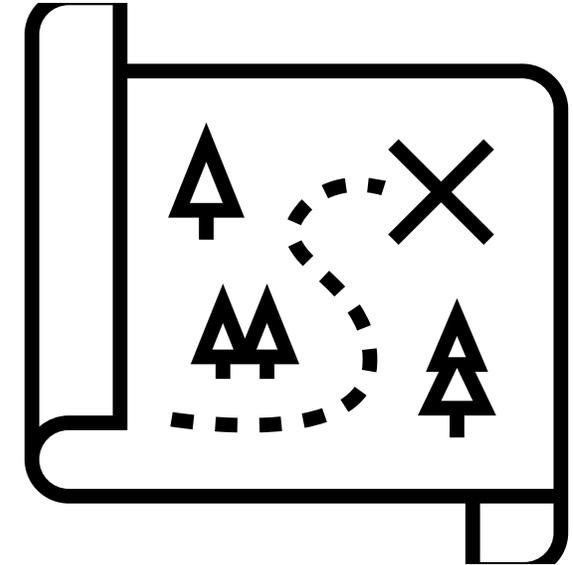
The People

- What?
 - How large is your congregation?
 - How regularly do they attend?
 - What is the demography? (age, gender, ethnicity)
 - What are their economic and family situations?
- Why?
 - To ensure your services matches the needs and wants of your congregation.



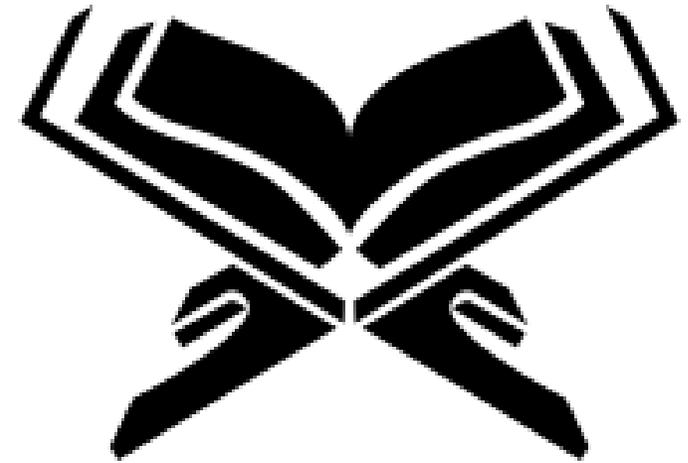
The Ecology

- What?
 - Where are you located?
 - What is in your local neighbourhood? Churches, other mosques, schools, businesses etc...
 - Who are the people nearby (Muslim and non-Muslim)?
 - What are the local issues and challenges? What about city-wide? Regional? National?
 - What resources are available in your neighborhood?
- Why?
 - To provide a unique and relevant service (the “gap”)
 - To maximise local resources
 - To address local challenges



The Theology

- What?
 - What tradition or denomination do your congregation belong to?
 - How have they learned about Islam? What forms of ibada do they value the most?
 - How do they perceive their relationship with Allah?
 - What are their knowledge or practice gaps?
- Why?
 - To meet the religious needs (*ilm, ibadat, mualimat*) of your congregation.
 - To cater or adapt services to be as meaningful as possible to your congregation.
 - To provide pastoral, educational, personal *tarbiyya*



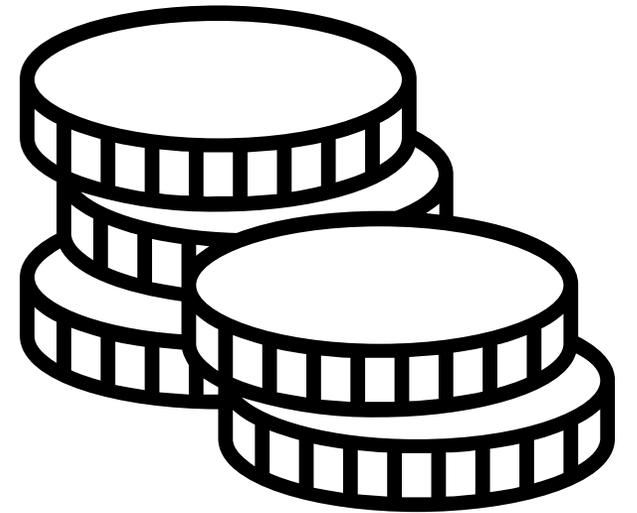
Forms

- What?
 - What is unique about your congregation?
 - What is the story of your congregation?
 - How do you operate (legally, practically, organizationally)?
 - What do you value?
- Why?
 - To know your strengths and weaknesses as a congregation.
 - To understand what makes you distinct from other mosques.
 - To recognize the particular ways in which decisions and authority operate in your congregation.
 - To explicitly state what it is you value and appreciate as a community.



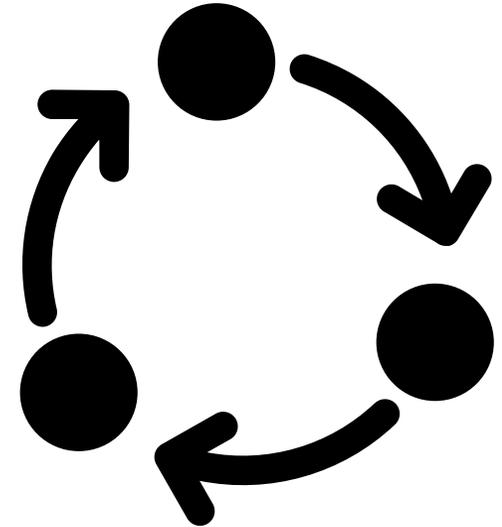
Resources

- What?
 - What are the financial, human, cultural, and physical capital or resources available to you?
 - How have you used these resources in the past? Where do they come from? How are they sustained? What threatens them?
- Why?
 - Assessing your resources, for example, a large space, or lots of young volunteers, or a strong financial base, helps you ensure you are using, protecting, and sustaining them correctly.
 - It also helps you see where your weaknesses are, and how to protect against them.



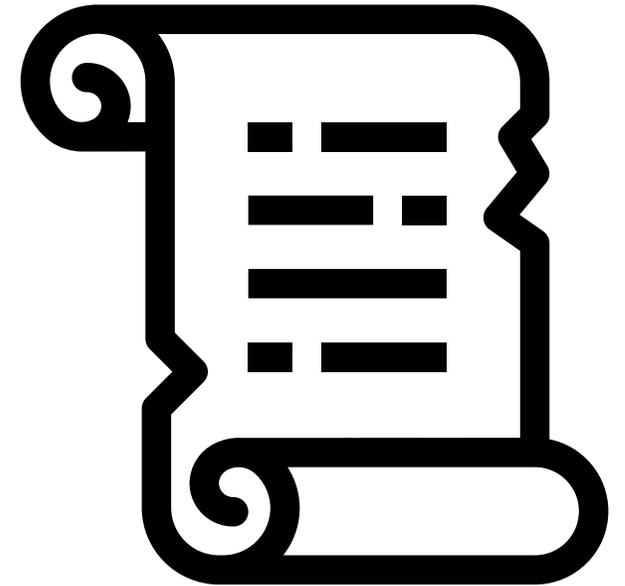
Process

- What?
 - How are decisions made? Who are the decision-makers?
 - Who drives new ideas and projects?
 - What is the “formal” process? What is the “informal” process?
- Why?
 - Being honest and realistic about how power and authority operates is an important step to growth.
 - The mosque is not just bricks and mortar, but the people involved. Understanding how they relate to each other, and ensuring it is fair, meaningful, and working, is central to keeping your mosque healthy.
 - Stagnant mosques will not struggle, and may even fold-in.



History

- What?
 - Who built this mosque? When? How?
 - What is the history of the building?
 - What is the history of your community?
- Why?
 - The mosque founders sacrificed in order to establish the mosque, remembering their efforts and praying for them is good adab.
 - The history of your mosque will become more and more important as it becomes older. Preserving it is doing a service for future generations.
 - Understanding your story will help you drive towards the future you want to achieve.



Ways to Research

Quantitative	Qualitative
Quantity (numbers, how many, how much)	Quality (nature, essence, abstract)
Big picture but shallow	Deep insights but restricted
Simple questions with short answers	Complex questions with complex answers
Big sample	Small sample
Test hypothesis	Discover and generate insight and ideas
Highly structured	Looser Structure



What tools are available?

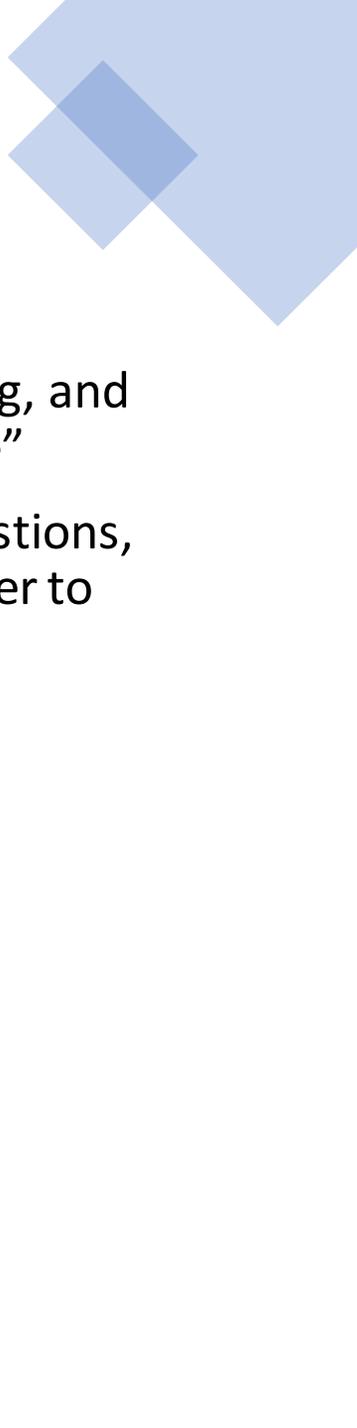


Census and Survey Data

- Census Data, Annual Population Survey, Local Authority
 - Other polls and surveys conducted nationally (i.e. Woolf Diversity Study)
 - Surveys of your congregation, using “Google Forms” or [OnlineSurveys.ac.uk](https://www.online-surveys.ac.uk/), as well as in person.
 - Collaborative methods
 - Chips in boxes (how did you travel here? Car/walk/cycle/bus etc..)
 - Pin in map to track where attendees have travelled from
 - “Post it note” responses to more complex questions
- 



Ethnographic Methods

- Participant observation – being present, observing, and making notes during activities. “Ethnographic eye”
 - Interviewing – 60 minute interviews with set questions, exploring key topics. Using an application like Otter to automatically transcribe.
 - Audio/Visual capture (using mobile phones) and subsequent analysis.
 - Focus Groups
- 



Community Organising Methods

- “Listening Campaigns” – a group of individuals undertaking one-to-ones with as many people as possible.
 - The campaign should be around 1 big question “what makes you angry?”, “what is something you want to change?” or even “what does the mosque mean to you?”
 - Sessions should be roughly 1 hour long, and meaningful. Be honest, share and listen equally.
 - A group of 10 can easily listen to hundreds of members over a few months.
 - Feed summarised responses into a shared document.
 - Neighbourhood Walks
 - Document what you see, what is nearby, who is on the streets, what businesses are open when.
- 

Islamic Methods

- Halaqa as a research method (see <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09518398.2013.805852> by Farah Ahmed)
- Shura as a research method

Reports



Reports should be accessible, written in the style, length, and format that makes it most useful to the relevant people.



Consider executive summaries, top level breakdown of findings.



Include empirical data (what you found, the raw information) and theory (your analysis of it, its relevance and application) .



Finally, always have actions to be taken as a result, it can help to make them S.M.A.R.T with specific individuals identified to complete them.

Specific
Measurable
Attainable
Relevant
Time-bound

Values of Research

- Integrity and ethical behaviour is utmost
 - Islamic Ethics in Fieldwork -
<https://journal.equinoxpub.com/FIR/article/view/12969>
- Organic over bureaucratic
- Honesty over impartiality
- Excellence over professionalism
- Accountability over representative
- What you have versus what you don't



Next steps?

1. Choose your question
2. Choose your methods
3. Choose your actions

Please get in touch for any more information.

Dr Abdul-Azim Ahmed

ahmedma1@cardiff.ac.uk

