

12. Conclusions & Recommendations

Main Conclusions

Who is active in this area ...

- This study has found that, by and large, Local Councils in Australia are doing relatively little to build bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians. There is great scope for greater participation by councils in this area.
- A key challenge is funding. Councils tended only to engage in activities of this kind when in receipt of a specified grant (such as Living in Harmony funding). Participation and interest tended to drop off after the funding lapsed. This was particularly a problem where the funding was for twelve months. Often projects which had momentum simply slipped off the agenda.
- Projects also tended to lose momentum when key people moved on to other employment.
- Councils had an essentially secular view of their role, and thus felt that targeting particular religious communities was outside of their remit. Moreover, councils tended to prefer general 'harmony' activities that include all CALD groups, rather than singling out a particular community.
- Another key challenge was that councils tended to have mental '**borders**' where unless the tensions were present in the local LGA, they felt they had little role to play in building bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians. This is despite the fact that Muslim-Australian residents of these areas reported ongoing experiences of racism, within and outside of their LGA.
- There appeared to be no partnerships between different councils, despite there being a number of obvious cases where this would make sense (such as Rockdale council and Bankstown council), and despite the fact that partnering up with another council would be financially beneficial through pooling of financial and human resources.
- By and large, it was community based organisations where the most lively activity was taking place.
- In the community sector, Muslim-Australians bear much of the responsibility for initiating and organising activities. Without greater support from the wider Australian community, largely volunteer run Muslim-Australian grass roots organisations are at risk of overload and burnout.

- The only non-Muslim groups with a major presence were Christian Church based groups engaged in inter-faith activities. With only one or two exceptions **'Mainstream' Australian** charities, civil society organisations, local community groups, and Anglo-Celtic 'mums and dads' from the suburbs were unlikely to be involved in initiating or organising activities to improve relations between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians. There is enormous scope for capacity building with these groups and for them to play a much greater role in taking responsibility for and helping to tackle this issue through initiatives and partnerships.
- Many of the activities have occurred as a direct result of the Living in Harmony Grants program, and more recently, DIAC managed community grants stemming from the National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security
- State government departments were also well represented, particularly in the early years after September 11, and post Cronulla riots. Agencies such as the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation were also involved in multicultural sporting programs, particularly those involving refugee communities.
- Finally, we found that Youth Services and Migrant Resource Centres were also represented among the partners or organising committees for many of the initiatives.

What are they doing...

- Where councils have activities in this area, the interfaith-model predominates. However inter-faith dialogue forums are limited in their membership and tend to draw a very particular, and not especially representative, group of participants. Moreover, formal interfaith dialogue ignores the fact that much of the conflict revolves around cultural and social tensions, rather than religious ones, and also ignores the extent to which the vast majority of Anglo-Celtic Australians are non-practicing Christians with a largely secular outlook.
- As for Muslims doing most of the initiating – it should be noted that the one area where non-Muslim or 'mainstream' organisations were actively engaged was in the types of activities that the study did not look at. Seminars, training workshops and the like are employed regularly by government departments, the private sector, NGOs etc at the organisational level, mostly to educate staff in terms of their interactions with the Muslim-Australian community. These groups *have* shown an interest and a demand - in fact many Muslim and Arab community organisations are finding it difficult to keep up with the demand for 'cross-cultural awareness' and 'Intro to Islam' type training.
- Overwhelmingly activities tended to involve women, particularly the small scale 'getting to know you' type initiatives. Women appeared to be much more comfortable and able to engage in such processes.

- Male centred activities tended to revolve around sport, and these activities were limited to only a couple of examples.
- The age group of non-Muslim-Australians participating in the activities tended to be over 55, particularly the interfaith type programs. However the Muslim-Australian participants tended to be under 40. Sport was a key exception.

What works...

- It was very clear from the study that the activities which provided ongoing personal contact between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians were very effective. This was particularly so for the initiatives involving women.
- However, activities involving men, particularly working class men, were scarce on the ground. Of the two case studies that did fall into this category—the two refugee soccer programs—there were some very difficult challenges. This does not mean, however that these are not worthwhile initiatives. Rather, special consideration needs to be given to funding support and mediation in these instances.
- Indeed, these two activities are among the most important in that they include in some ways what we might think of as a key 'target group' – Anglo-Celtic working class men who are typically over represented among those with more negative attitudes towards Muslim-Australians, and less responsive to the types of 'talking it through' activities that women tend to be drawn to such as the Women's Dinner or the Social Craft Group.
- Simply bringing groups together (especially where there were power differentials or aggressive masculine behaviours involved) was not enough. The activities that worked best were those that allowed some safe and informal social interaction, where 'difficult' issues about religious and cultural differences could be discussed, but where 'commonalities' could also be brought to the fore.
- The Contact theory hypothesis was supported here, in that there were a number of important pre-conditions for success. The conditions of success outlined by Allport (1954) and subsequently Pettigrew (1998) were born out by the research. In sum, these are:
 - *equal status between groups*
 - *common goals*
 - *inter-group co-operation and*
 - *support or sanction of the authorities, law or custom*
 - *learning about out-groups that corrects negative views;*
 - *positively reinforced behaviour modification that leads to attitude changes;*
 - *generating affective ties, such as friendship;*

- *and, in-group reappraisal of their existing norms and customs to be more inclusive of out-group worldviews*

- There was also evidence that these 'contact' based initiatives were more successful when participants had been exposed to **'myth busting' messages**, and had seen positive media coverage of Muslim-Australians, particularly through documentaries.

What is missing...

- Capacity building within and involvement of the non-Muslim-Australian community is very important. Their involvement was largely absent.
- By and large, the demographic profile of participants in initiatives with the explicit aim of building better relations between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians was predominantly middle-class, and well educated people who are already somewhat accepting of cultural diversity. Women were more involved than men.
- Men, particularly working class men, were not at all well represented. This is so for both the Muslim and non-Muslim side.
- What is missing, therefore, are activities which engage a broader and more representative group of participants and able to attract those with less than positive views of Muslim-Australians.
- Activities and initiatives that employ and take place in public spaces should be encouraged. Activities (particularly interactive ones such as festivals, public art, or public screenings) in public spaces such as parks, shopping centres, or outdoor street-malls are ideal in that they capture a passing crowd who would never otherwise go out of their way to participate in a 'harmony' type activity.
- There is more scope for projects dealing with 'everyday' neighbourhood tensions such as the Cramer Street Project.
- Among the disengaged, the workplace was the most common space where Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians met. There is great scope for 'relationship' building activities within workplaces, rather than just 'cultural sensitivity training'.
- Neighbours were the second most common way that Muslims and non-Muslims came to know one another. There is great scope for local government in particular to promote and facilitate these relationships by sponsoring neighbourhood activities such as street parties where residents donate food and time. These activities could be effectively built around occasions such as Harmony Day, or Australia Day, or potentially around key religious festivals for the different communities.
- Media coverage is a central part of promoting the good work of these initiatives. This is just as important as funding the initiative itself, especially 'contact' based activities where a relatively small number of people are engaged directly. 'Good news' stories of these activities can have secondary impact on promoting a positive view of Muslim-Australians in the wider, disengaged community.
- At the council level, there was a propensity towards '**feel good**' activities that 'celebrate multiculturalism' but that do not really engage with the issues.
- The '**racist**' and '**disengaged**' among the Anglo-Celtic participants in the study were fairly strongly of the mind that they would not likely be drawn to an activity which explicitly aimed at 'building bridges with Muslim-Australians'.

Recommendations

Partnerships, Funding & Organisational Issues

1. Councils should be encouraged to partner up to pool financial and human resources, and to tackle issues that effect more than one LGA. For example councils with a high proportion of Muslim-Australians can usefully partner up with councils that are predominantly Anglo-Celtic-Australian. Often the 'multicultural' councils are the ones that engage with these issues and the main audience and participants are just Muslim-Australians from that area. Partnerships between councils (for example: Bankstown and Sutherland, or Auburn with Warringah in NSW) should be encouraged.
2. Local, State and Federal government should put their energies into engaging **'mainstream' community groups** and charities, as well as **'everyday'** suburban Anglo-Celtic 'mums and dads'. There is a need to engage beyond church based organisations to everyday people. There is scope to link into this section of the community through parents involved in schools and Saturday sport, for example.
3. Further, attention needs to be given to engaging a broader cross-section of Muslim-Australian organisations, especially Arabic speaking communities. The Lebanese Australian community was under represented in the 'contact' type activities; yet they are the largest of the Muslim-Australian communities and the target of much of the racism and intercultural tensions.
4. Sufficient funding for activities needs to be offered, particularly to fund key staff on initiatives. This is particularly so for small, Muslim-Australian volunteer run community organisations, many of whom are already over-stretched. Over reliance on the goodwill of volunteers (of course there is a place for volunteers) can lead to burn-out.
5. There is a great deal of scope for DIAC to foster partnerships with state, federal and local government agencies, and between government, and the community sector. At present, a good portion of the activities uncovered in this study were reliant on one-off Living in Harmony grant funding.
6. Related to this, it is recommended that DIAC / LIH consider 3 year funding cycles, perhaps on evaluation for projects that demonstrate some success in the first year. The rationale for this is that often projects are really just 'finding their feet' in the first year. Moreover, successful projects need to build on initial momentum and be given time to either gain support for internal funding (in the case of local government) or to link into other forms of support.
7. Additionally, more assistance could be provided in linking successful projects into further support through other levels of government, or NGOs or similar. Good initiatives happen once then don't continue.

‘What Works’: Where Should the Funding Emphasis be?

8. Activities in public spaces are important to capture widest audience. Beaches parks, malls, town squares shopping centres.
9. Interactive ‘**contact**’ type initiatives with room for informal social engagement.
10. Reciprocity and hospitality from both sides is a very important aspect of contact type initiatives. Activities where both sides provide volunteers, food etc are examples.
11. Sport was a positive means of engaging men. There should be additional attention and focus paid to getting parents (both Muslim and non-Muslim) involved.
12. Activities that engage men, particularly under represented groups.
13. Documentaries featuring positive stories of Muslim-Australians seemed to have an impact on the disengaged. There is potential to direct funding to the production of these, perhaps in partnership with Australia Council for the Arts.
14. However unless these are screened on commercial television, viewing among the target audience is minimal. There are two recommendations on this front. First, work with commercial networks to screen such documentaries during the summer non-ratings period, and second, to screen them in public places such as outdoor malls on large screens.
15. Free outdoor screenings are an important means of engaging the disengaged. A suitable format would be series of mini-documentaries shown in public places over summer. Many councils and community organisations produce little ‘feel good’ DVDs however little or no attention is paid to distribution, and impact on the TARGET community.
16. Funding for community based activities should also consider funding an associated media campaign (even involving paid advertising and editorial) to promote the community projects that do happen. As many people are affected by just hearing about these things going on.
17. ‘**Transforming conflict**’ type activities are needed to tackle anti-social behaviour and help solve inter-racial tensions between young people without resorting to violence.
18. There is more scope for ‘**Helping together**’ type activities where Muslim-Australian organisations and individuals work with non-Muslims on joint charitable activities such as raising money for drought affected communities, the homeless or the environment. Such activities can be important in reducing the sense of powerlessness many immigrant communities feel, and tapping into positive ‘hospitality’ sentiments.

19. Neighbouring & Workplace are key sites for activity funding.
20. Finally, reliance on small scale community based activities is not enough. These need to work in tandem with public '**myth busting**' campaigns, and strong political and community leadership promoting a message of peace and tolerance.