

1. Executive Summary

The Centre for Research on Social Inclusion was commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to conduct qualitative, empirical research to investigate community-based activities for improving relations between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians. The focus of the project was Muslim-Australians who have increasingly experienced racism and discrimination—particularly since the Cronulla riots—in the face of recent global events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th, and the London and the Bali bombings. Through an examination of a variety of initiatives and projects developed by local councils and Muslim and non-Muslim non-government organisations, the project investigated the most effective community-based activities for improving relations between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians.

The principle objectives of this project were:

- To identify the most effective community-based activities for improving relations between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians,
- To explore what works and what doesn't in regards to relationship building initiatives and projects,
- To assess Muslim-Australian perceptions of and attitudes towards local city councils,
- To assess both Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians who are 'disengaged' from formal activities to build bridges between the two groups in order to gain further insight into what kinds of activities might attract them, and the extent of their mixing with the 'other side'.

Methodology

The project used both qualitative and quantitative data gathering techniques. These comprised a mix of web-based reviews, a survey, stakeholder interviews, and case studies of selected initiatives. Specifically;

- **analysis of existing research data** obtained from the 'Building Neighbourhood Harmony' *Living in Harmony* partnership to identify councils who have undertaken relevant initiatives directed towards Muslim-Australian communities in their jurisdiction,
- **web-based review** of grass-roots and local government initiatives in Australia,
- visitation to the **top 20 councils** (in terms of people identifying as Muslim residents in the 2006 Census) to **interview key staff** to assess the number, quality and type of initiatives undertaken there,
- **online survey of the top 20 councils** which asked them to list all harmony initiatives targeted at Muslim-Australians their council has convened in the

last five years. The survey also sought their views on what the most effective programs are, and the barriers to implementing them.

- **meetings, email and telephone contact** with a range of representatives and community leaders in Muslim-Australian communities to gather information on and seek views about initiatives of which they have knowledge or have been a part.
- Furthermore, there was a **web-based review** of local initiatives from within Australia and overseas; nine Australian initiatives were selected as **case studies** involving questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions with organisers and participants.

Key Insights Gained

The research provided some important insights into relation building activities undertaken by both local city councils and non-government organisations. From these insights eight (8) key conclusions can be drawn:

- Local councils are not as active as they might be in sponsoring and fostering relationship building activities.
- It is the non-government organisations who are the leaders in building relations between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians.
- Projects aimed at building bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians are often short lived with no designed long term prospects.
- Middle class women were over represented in harmony type activities. Working class men of both Muslim and non-Muslim-Australian background were dramatically under-represented.
- Contact based initiatives were most successful but needed to engage a broader cross-section of society.
- Sport was a key way to engage disengaged men.
- Better relations between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians could be established if more grass-roots level initiatives and projects were available to both communities involved.
- Alcohol, food, and gender relations were the key barriers to greater levels of mixing and friendship.