

2. Introduction & Project Objectives

There is an increased awareness within academic, government and community circles of the need to find ways to engage Muslim-Australian communities in dialogue with government and to enhance relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians. Identifying the most effective strategies for improving relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims at the local level is an essential step in enhancing the capacity of government to create an inclusive, cohesive and harmonious Australia.

Our diverse society is sometimes referred to as a 'community of communities'. Yet what does this principal mean in practice, what programs have been developed to achieve it, what are the challenges, and what innovative possibilities are there for new initiatives which might be suitable for working specifically with Muslim-Australians in the Australian context? Recent research in this area has emphasised the importance of local initiatives in building community harmony, tackling racism, and increasing social cohesion in diverse neighbourhoods. The most successful initiatives seem to be those that reach beyond one off 'multicultural festival days' and strive to foster exchange at the level of everyday interaction, both spontaneous and planned. Local government is increasingly seen as working 'at the coalface' of cultural diversity. Local government is best positioned in many ways to engage in the frontline work of fostering harmony and exchange across ethnic and religious difference and to work in partnership with community based groups in achieving these ends.

Since 2001 there has been an array of local and community based initiatives such as forums, dialogue groups and inter-religious exchanges. To date though, there has not been a national study of the range of strategies deployed at the local level or their effectiveness. This research project aims to fill this gap.

Research Objectives

With a primary focus on those Local Government Areas (LGAs) with high numbers of Muslim-Australians, provide a national audit of best practice local government and community-based 'grassroots' initiatives which;

- 1) Foster better relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians at the local level.
- 2) Build trust and engagement between diverse Muslim communities.

The aim of the research was to:

- **Identify** those initiatives which are most effective.
- **Understand** what has allowed such forms of dialogue and engagement to emerge structurally or at the community level; and what councils and community groups can do to create or facilitate the structural conditions that foster such activities

- **Make recommendations** which build on information gained through interviews and consultations with members of local Muslim communities and local Council authorities.

To this end, the research involved the following tasks:

- Identifying both formal and informal forms of successful inter- and intra-community engagement.
- Providing in-depth analysis of nine (9) case studies selected from initiatives identified in the audit as particularly successful.
- Research into international best practice in local initiatives targeted at Muslim communities, particularly those that facilitate positive engagement with non-Muslim communities
- Consulting a variety of Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians—both ‘everyday’ people and community representatives—on their ideas for new initiatives and their experiences of those initiatives already implemented

1. The research focused on Australian initiatives instigated by local councils or local community organisations aimed at:

- Building positive relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians and between diverse Muslims themselves.
- Successfully engaging Muslim-Australians with local government
- *Examples:* Organised intercultural sport days; a program of cross-cultural home visits between Muslim and non-Muslims; or a neighbourhood celebration of Eid ul-Fitr where the organisers actively seek to invite and include non-Muslims in the celebrations.

2. The research investigated examples of informal, organic, inter-cultural engagement between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians.

- These are forms of community activity not formally initiated by councils such as a community activity informally organised by local residents, or positive forms of everyday exchange. The conditions of possibility and the characteristics of such informal engagements were identified.

The research project was designed by Dr Amanda Wise of the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion at Macquarie University, and conducted with the assistance of Dr Jan Ali, and Ms. Rebecca Coates, and Dr Gillian Vogl. Mr Bernard Leckning and Mr Sudheesh Bhasi contributed to sections of the final report, while Ms Banu Senay and Dr Rochelle Spencer assisted with the editing process.