



RESEARCH REPORT

Pathways to culturally diverse volunteering towards COVID-19 recovery

Volunteer West acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

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Executive Summary

While COVID-19 has significantly reduced volunteering in Victoria and nationally, volunteers from culturally diverse groups have played an important role in assisting Victorians who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. As we continue to move into the recovery phase, we need to ensure volunteering is reinvigorated and extended to more people. The efforts and resources that facilitate volunteering in culturally diverse communities are less known. The Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing through the local Brimbank Melton Area commissioned Volunteer West to conduct a focused study to better understand the critical success factors for volunteer engagement among culturally diverse groups.

Methodology

The research was conducted from April to July 2021 involving two community organisations in Brimbank and Melton as case studies. Data was collected through interviews, a focus group, and site visits. The vision was for 'thick descriptions,' a deep dive rather than a broad canvas, that would be revelatory to challenge common assumptions and biases, and thus fill the gap with much needed practice-leadership. Importantly, the methodology rested on Volunteer West's distinguishing non-extractive action-research framework.

Action-Research Framework

Amplify understanding of active forms of volunteering in diverse communities

Our Values

AUDACITY



Brokering new paths for action-research, policy and practice with deep insights

IMPACT



Capture and highlight the extent of the impact of diverse forms of volunteering

AMPLIFY



Greater recognition and resources to diverse forms of volunteering

EMPATHY



Understand frames of volunteering from the lens of the community

Our action-research approaches

Stories of new volunteering frames and narratives:

We seek to understand, not impose our own assumptions or frames.

Each touch-point contributes to the community:

We conduct data-collection through sharing insights rather than 'extraction'. We aim for partnerships and sustained engagement.

Strength-based:

We learn what works and how they are done, and with permission, amplify the strengths.

We are accountable to the community:


We report back and validate our insights with the community. We ensure rigour and depth to achieve practice-leadership.




The case studies

Careful selection of case studies was done collaboratively, informed by considerations of access, relevance to local concerns, strong links to COVID and emergency volunteering, and potential for practice and policy application.

The chosen cases were:



The **Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES)** is an emergency management organisation. Regional units are employed as paid staff while local units are run by volunteers. VICSES volunteers and staff respond to a range of emergency situations, including storm, flood, landslide, and search and rescue.



The Sikh community, represented by the **Dal Baba Bidhi Chand Sikh Temple** in Melton, is a faith-based organisation managed entirely by volunteers. The Sikh community is known for their food relief program during disasters and COVID-19.

Volunteering activities within culturally and linguistically diverse communities

This study finds that volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds take on a multitude of volunteering roles in the community.

In areas of focus for the department, some core activities have been identified:



Assistance to communities and emergency services:

For the Sikh community, their core volunteering activities involved food relief operations to people who are disadvantaged or affected by disasters, such as the bushfires. At VICSES, there are a wide range of activities that volunteers can be involved in, including emergency provision, logistics, human resource, and administration.



Pandemic response:

During the pandemic, an increase in community demand for food relief led to an increase in volunteering activities at the Sikh temple. The prompt response to the needs created by the coronavirus pandemic shows the importance of the ability to mobilise volunteers and preparedness embedded in multicultural and multifaith organisations. VICSES provided hub-and-spoke support to help manage the major COVID-19 exposure sites and testing sites. Through this involvement, members gained a deeper insight into the importance of engaging volunteers and community leaders from culturally diverse groups to ensure effective communication with affected communities and households.

Volunteering in multicultural contexts

The study finds that different groups have different frames of 'volunteering' and what it entails for individuals and communities.



Motivations for volunteering

There are three dominant themes on volunteer motivation:

- volunteering as a way of life
- volunteering as a pathway to employment
- the desire to give back to the community



Staying in volunteering

Factors that sustain the commitment to continue volunteering:

- a sense of camaraderie and belonging
- mutually supportive networks
- skills development

Building bridges for social cohesion

Through volunteering, people from culturally diverse backgrounds create connections not only within their groups but also with the wider community. They integrate their own culture of volunteering, internalised through intergenerational socialisation, into the mainstream to build social cohesion in the Australian way of life.

Reframing forms of volunteering

A key finding of this study is a need to re-conceptualise active forms of volunteering, broadly referred to in this report as role-based volunteering and fluid volunteering, each with resulting practice implications.

- Role-based volunteering is bounded by roles and agreements.
- Fluid volunteering is shaped by needs of circumstance and capability of the individual volunteer, allows movement across various roles.

Volunteering experiences go beyond the common formal-informal categories of volunteering, where the 'informal' label is often associated with volunteering undertaken in multicultural and multifaith context. Such labelling has a disenfranchising effect. Participation in 'informal' activities is not always depicted as volunteering in official statistical reports.

	Role-based volunteering	Fluid volunteering
Ethos/narrative	Exchange/transaction 'Free will' Input of time and labour Psychic income	Volunteering as a way of life Civic/community connection Sense of place and 'being' (not just 'doing')
Volunteering experience	Bounded by role Contractual	Open Bounded by needs of circumstance, the organisation, community, and capability of the individual volunteer
Tools and approaches	Human resources management where volunteer management is based on recruitment, retention, reward, and recognition framework	Culture-based, customary procedures Hands on deck (volunteers find a role that they can do, where people are needed) Mobility (moving through role to role)



Barriers to volunteer participation for culturally diverse groups

While culturally diverse groups are more likely to engage in fluid volunteering, they continue to experience barriers to accessing volunteering opportunities in mainstream and role-based organisations. The barriers identified include:

- » Low uptake of volunteering opportunities by culturally diverse groups. Mainstream organisations consider this as a challenge, but it can also be seen as an outcome of the different barriers that exist within these organisations.
- » Reactive rather than proactive approach to recruitment of volunteers of diverse backgrounds.
- » Language and cultural barriers.
- » Facilities and operational requirements.
- » Discriminatory attitudes within mainstream organisations.
- » Lack of time due to family and work commitments.

Where there is proactive recruitment, there is an opportunity to improve the impact for uptake with sustained engagement of local communities beyond one-off outreach events.

Why engage culturally diverse groups in volunteering

People from culturally diverse backgrounds have a strong motivation to help their communities (whether that is their local neighbourhood, cultural or religious group, state, or country) and a commitment to the common good through volunteering. This has not been well captured in past formal data or surveys which often rely on communication in English and are disseminated through established mainstream channels and networks.

Raising the profile and uptake of inclusive and diverse volunteering allows organisations to tap into the assets of multicultural communities, such as community leaders who can serve as a go-between and can increase awareness of cultural considerations in the context of emergency response.



The case studies also show that the relational networks of multicultural and multifaith groups enable fluid volunteering to be readily activated for prompt and effective response to the impact of the pandemic and other unprecedented events. Engaging the diverse groups and supporting their volunteering activities is an opportunity to utilise their existing social and cultural capital towards COVID-19 recovery.

Critical success factors for engaging culturally diverse volunteers

Aside from breaking down barriers to accessing volunteering opportunities, there are also important elements that organisations need to take on board to successfully engage volunteers from culturally diverse groups. These include:

- » Proactive and sustained approach to engagement with culturally diverse cohorts
- » Promoting diversity, inclusion, and cultural safety through leadership and champions
- » Building volunteering confidence among culturally diverse groups
- » Breaking barriers and ensuring cultural safety for culturally diverse volunteers by providing adjustments and accommodations, such as gender-specific toilets, uniform options, and practical rather than English-based assessments
- » Building on the strengths and resources of multicultural groups, including leveraging the mobility of fluid volunteering in emergency and crisis contexts
- » Nurturing a sense of belonging, through relationships and connections, as a core part of the volunteering experience

Implications for policy and practice

The study suggests a re-framing of volunteering to challenge the presumption of less volunteering engagement in multicultural communities, recognise the role and value of fluid volunteering, and focus and invest in relationship building and collaboration.

Key findings

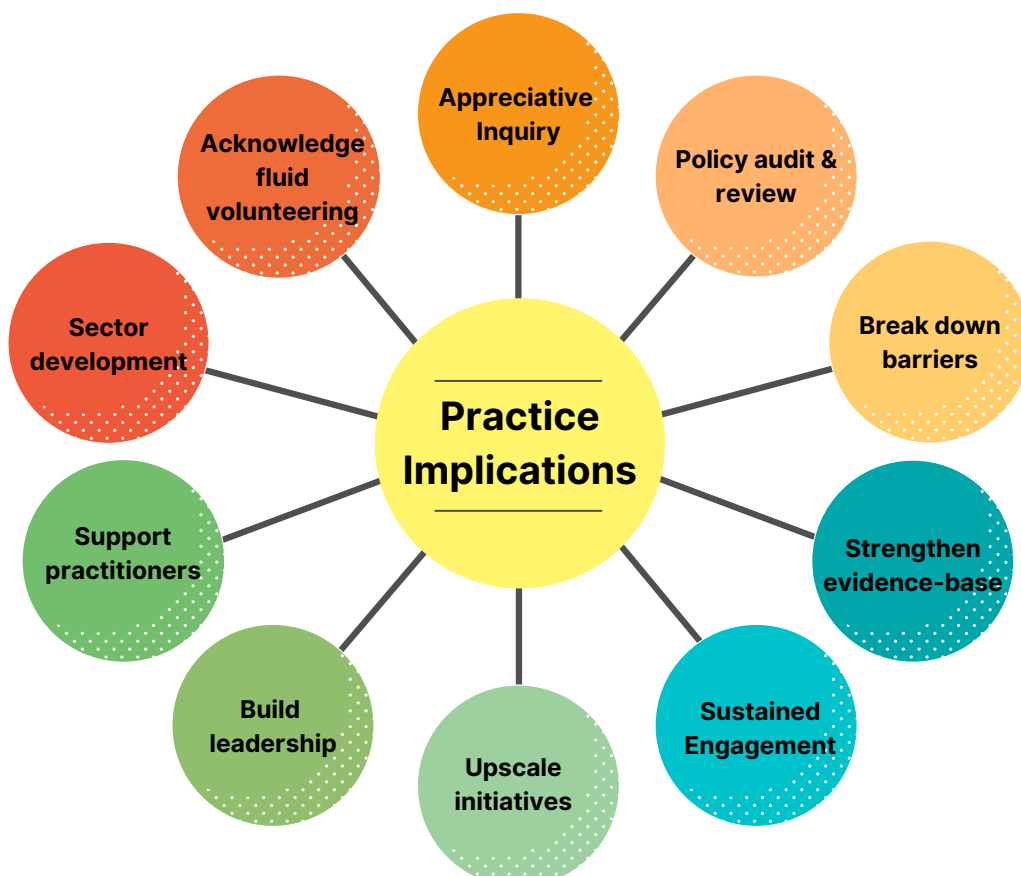
Volunteering in culturally diverse communities

Motivations

- A way of being
- Giving back
- Pathway to employment

Forms of Volunteering

- Role Based
- Fluid



Recommendations

Opportunity/ Strategy	For Government	For Volunteer Resource Centres and Community Organisations	For Volunteer Engagement Practitioners
<p>Acknowledge fluid volunteering as a legitimate form</p>	<p>Provide flexible funding and explore not-for-profit governance and regulatory models to provide supporting mechanisms for fluid-volunteering to flourish.</p> <p>Revise census questions to accurately capture the range of volunteering activities performed by culturally diverse communities outside of formal structured settings. This recognises and elevates forms of fluid volunteering & their impact.</p>	<p>Revisit the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement to account for the dynamics and impact of fluid-volunteering across a range of culturally diverse communities.</p>	<p>Document the trends in volunteering among culturally diverse groups to account for community participation that contribute to community development and social cohesion, including those that are ad hoc, intergenerational, and relational rather than transactional.</p>
<p>Elevate fluid volunteering through appreciative inquiry</p>	<p>Promote, champion, and fund action-research studies to deepen the understanding of practices using new framing of 'fluid-volunteering' (replacing 'informal' volunteering framing).</p>	<p>Undertake further research to deepen and broaden our understanding of the dynamics and impact of fluid-volunteering across a range of diverse communities.</p>	<p>Develop new practice and professional development resources, such as training and toolkits, to support fluid-volunteering. These include program evaluation that employs meaningful measurement of relationships and connections created during volunteer engagement.</p>
<p>Audit and review of policies and processes towards mechanisms to ensure diversity and inclusion</p>	<p>Adopt a policy that elevates fluid volunteering as instrumental to building participation and social cohesion. This policy lens then appropriately resources multicultural and multifaith actors as community-builders who proactively build connections to 'the mainstream'.</p>	<p>Audit and review of operational practices and policies can help identify barriers as well as the processes that need to be adapted to break these down.</p>	<p>Identify, review, and amend policies and practices that create barriers for volunteers from culturally diverse groups.</p>



Opportunity/ Strategy	For Government	For Volunteer Resource Centres and Community Organisations	For Volunteer Engagement Practitioners
<p>Address barriers to volunteer participation experienced by culturally diverse groups</p>	<p>Allocate funding aimed to equip community organisations to address barriers, including provisions for separate change rooms, adapted uniforms, as well as soft skills training required to develop inclusive volunteering environments.</p> <p>Resource the development and promotion of advocacy resources to build awareness and appreciation of the range of volunteering that culturally diverse people do.</p>	<p>Improve facilities and facilitate adjustments for multicultural and multifaith cohorts, including gender-specific toilets, variety of uniform options, translated materials and communications, practical rather than English language-based assessments and utilising existing funding support for English language development of volunteers.</p>	<p>Collaborate with volunteers in designing approaches to developing cross-cultural awareness and ensuring cultural safety.</p> <p>Use plain English and minimise acronyms & jargon during training and assessments.</p>
<p>Strengthen the evidence base for culturally diverse volunteering and their impact</p>	<p>Earmark funding for the mapping of diversity data (cultural background, gender, age, ability) of volunteers across both role-based and fluid volunteering in the Brimbank and Melton local government areas. This can be done in collaboration with community organisations that engage and support volunteers.</p>	<p>Collect information on the diversity of volunteers within the organisation to better understand and support them. Conduct research to obtain disaggregated data on key demographic groups with the aim of gaining insights into the various ways they contribute to community development and social cohesion through volunteering.</p>	<p>Develop new tools to better capture the range of practices and impacts of culturally diverse volunteering.</p>
<p>Proactive and sustained engagement with culturally diverse groups</p>	<p>Support the development of a framework for local partnerships among government agencies, regional peak volunteer organisations, mainstream organisations, and multicultural groups that highlights local and active forms of volunteering practiced (such as fluid volunteering) and to stem the decline in 'formal' role-based volunteering.</p>	<p>Build institutional linkages between mainstream organisations like VICSES and multicultural groups. This requires brokerage and network-building expertise so the links form mutually supportive networks.</p>	<p>Collaborate with local government units and regional peak bodies, such as Volunteer West, to develop diverse and inclusive volunteer engagement strategies.</p>

Opportunity/ Strategy	For Government	For Volunteer Resource Centres and Community organisations	For Volunteer engagement practitioners
Upscale volunteering programs and initiatives	Provide appropriate support and invest in hard and soft infrastructure in Melbourne’s western region to support and grow volunteering to the scale required to deliver government policy outcomes, such as covid-health communications, emergency and crisis response, anti-racism, and social cohesion.	Leverage off Volunteer West’s resources and networks developed through long time engagement with culturally diverse community organisations across Brimbank and Melton.	Initiate and participate in communities-of-practice, such as the Volunteer Managers Network, to exchange ideas and share insights and best practices in engaging culturally diverse volunteers. These networks can be channels for synergy while amplifying each practitioner’s work.
Build capacity and raise the profile of culturally diverse leaders in the sector	Local councils to resource and promote leadership training programs among culturally diverse groups, through links with Leadership Victoria.	Increase visible representation of volunteers from culturally diverse groups within organisations to build volunteering confidence and connection with target communities. Appoint multicultural champions as speakers during information sessions and support them to build leadership experience, for instance, through links with Leadership Victoria. Bring on board culturally diverse volunteers in advisory groups and committees.	Aside from the Volunteer Managers Network run by Volunteer West, an additional opportunity could be to run a leadership community-of-practice that provides a mutually supportive space for culturally diverse volunteer leaders to grow and thrive.
Acknowledge and support the critical role and impact of volunteer engagement practitioners	Allocate flexible funding for capability building and resources required to sustain volunteer engagement.	Advocate and build the evidence for the need to employ and support volunteer engagement practitioners as career professionals.	Document the relationship-building and community-building activities that form volunteer engagement roles, particularly in paving the way towards inclusive and culturally safe volunteering.
Capacity building for sector development	Support initiatives of regional volunteer resource centres that build relationships across civil society so that during crisis and emergency the networks created can be readily activated.	Collaborate for the establishment of participation-building infrastructures and programs for culturally diverse volunteers and volunteer engagement practitioners. These include community hubs for resource and assets sharing that promote and capitalise on diversity and inclusion.	Develop a diversified volunteer engagement toolkit, in collaboration with culturally diverse volunteers, including project advisory or reference groups.

1 Background and aim

The range of benefits of volunteering at both an individual and societal level are widely reported. For volunteers, these include social connections, sense of belonging, skills building, and pathways to employment.¹ Volunteering provides opportunities for community and civic connection, while also enabling access to new social and support networks. The recently released State of Volunteering in Victoria report (2020) estimates the value of volunteering to Victoria in 2019 as \$58.1 billion, which reinforces its significance to the economy.²

\$58.1 BILLION

While COVID-19 has significantly disrupted volunteering in Victoria and nationally,³ there is also evidence that volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups⁴ have played a critical role in domains, such as emergency relief, to respond to the adverse impact of the pandemic. Anecdotal evidence from Volunteer West also indicates that COVID-19 drove the development of new options for virtual volunteering and engaged cohorts of participants.⁵ A report by Think Impact (2020) prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Social Services highlights the willingness of communities to participate in emergency response activities as crucial to social and economic recovery from COVID-19 and future crises.⁶

1 mpcconsulting (2018). *Report on the Review of Volunteer Management Activity*. Prepared for the Department of Social Services. Available at https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2019/accessibleversion-report-review-volunteer-management-activity.pdf

2 State of Volunteering in Victoria 2020. Available at <https://stateofvolunteering.org.au>. *Key findings:* <https://stateofvolunteering.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Key-Findings-1.pdf>

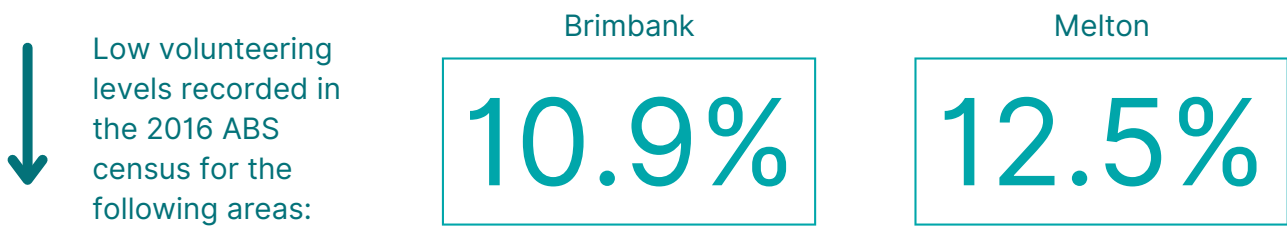
3 ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods (2020). *The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*. Available at https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/6/The_experience_of_volunteers_during_the_early_stages_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_0.pdf

4 Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities broadly refers to people born or originated from overseas in non-main English-speaking countries. See, for example, definitions from <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1289.0> and <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-family-violencedata-collection-framework/data-collection-standards-culturally-and> In this report, we refer to them as *culturally diverse or multicultural groups*.

5 See for example, Sikh community volunteers providing emergency aid during the bushfire and COVID-19 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/14/if-you-want-anything-done-get-the-sikhscommunity-wins-admirers-for-bushfire-and-covid-aid>

6 Think Impact (2020). *Volunteering, Participatory Action and Social Cohesion: Reimagining volunteering for contemporary Australia*. Prepared for the Department of Social Services. Available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f1e61b22056001e99212c01/t/5fc9800bfedaa13a48582daa/1607041056387/NNVCR+Report.pdf>

There is a data gap in terms of volunteer participation among culturally diverse groups. In the State of Volunteering Victoria 2020 report, only 30% of ‘volunteer involving organisations’ reported having culturally diverse people as representative of their volunteer profile. In the local government areas of Brimbank and Melton where there is a significant proportion of residents born overseas and from non-English speaking backgrounds,⁷ the 2016 ABS census data show low levels of volunteering by people aged 15 years and over. Only 10.9% of people in Brimbank and 12.5% of people in Melton have done voluntary work through an organisation or group in the year before the census.⁸ These figures also put Brimbank and Melton among the areas with the lowest rates of volunteering in Victoria, according to the Ministerial Council for Volunteers 2017 report.⁹



While it appears from the data that there is a low level of volunteer participation among people from culturally diverse backgrounds, it is important to note that this underrepresentation may be due to lack of reporting of volunteering activities from these groups. Census questions and statistics on volunteering focus more on unpaid activities undertaken with mainstream organisations or in formal settings.

However, people from culturally diverse groups are more likely to participate in informal volunteering,¹⁰ so may not see their contributions as volunteering and, thus, do not identify themselves as volunteers.¹¹

The COVID-19 recovery phase is an opportunity to support and enhance volunteering capacity and capability in culturally diverse communities in recognition of the important role they play in responding to emergencies. There is a need to ensure volunteering is reinvigorated and extended to more people.

⁷ See Brimbank Community Profile at <https://profile.id.com.au/brimbank/home>, and the Melton Community Profile at <https://profile.id.com.au/melton/home>.

⁸ 2016 ABS Census Data available at https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/LGA24650 (Melton) and https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/LGA21180 (Brimbank)

⁹ State of Victoria, Ministerial Council for Volunteers (2017). *Volunteers in Victoria: Trends, challenges, and opportunities*. Available at <https://www.volunteer.vic.gov.au/ministerial-council-volunteers>.

¹⁰ This study suggests the concept of ‘fluid volunteering,’ which is discussed in detail in Section 4.2.

¹¹ AMES Australia (2020). *Research Briefing on Volunteering in CALD Communities*. Available at <https://www.ames.net.au/-/media/files/research/ames-briefing--cald-volunteering.pdf>; Ministerial Council for Volunteers (2017).

Volunteer West has been commissioned by the Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing, Brimbank Melton Area to conduct a study that aims to better understand the critical success factors for volunteer engagement among culturally diverse groups.

The aim of this study is two-fold. First, we aim to investigate the critical success factors of community organisations in Melbourne's West in engaging volunteers from culturally diverse communities during emergency response and recovery. Second, we seek to identify ways by which volunteer engagement of culturally diverse communities contributes to social cohesion during COVID-19 recovery.

Specifically, we seek to understand:

- Volunteering activities within culturally diverse groups that relate to COVID-19 emergency response and recovery.
- The barriers and enablers of volunteer participation for culturally diverse groups in Melbourne's western region.
- Prospects to leverage off the experience and expertise of volunteers from culturally diverse groups into strategies to support volunteer mobilisation in times of crisis.
- The potential of volunteer participation within culturally diverse groups as a mechanism to enhance community connection and mental health during COVID-19 recovery.

2 Our methodology

The research was conducted from April to July 2021 involving two community organisations in Brimbank and Melton. Data were collected through interviews, a focus group, and site visits. The vision was for 'thick descriptions' (a deep dive rather than a broad canvas) that would be revelatory to challenge common assumptions and biases. At each stage, iterative reflection informed by the literature (formal, grey, and practitioner insights) was critical to developing the insights and the implications to ensure robust findings and practice-leadership. Importantly, the methodology rested on Volunteer West's distinguishing non-extractive action-research framework to fill the gap with much needed practice-leadership (see page 1 for framework).

The case studies

To achieve the research aim, two community organisations in the Brimbank and Melton areas were engaged as case studies.

Careful selection of case studies was done collaboratively, informed by considerations of access, relevance to local concerns, strong links to COVID and emergency volunteering, and potential for practice and policy application.

Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES)

The first case study is the **Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES)**, selected to explore the experiences of a 'mainstream' organisation engaging people from culturally diverse or multicultural groups into volunteering. While members at the VICSES regional units are employed as paid staff, local units are run by volunteers, including those in leadership positions.

Dal Baba Bidhi Chand Sikh Temple

The second case is the Sikh community, represented by the **Dal Baba Bidhi Chand Sikh Temple**, based in Melton. This faith-based organisation is managed entirely by volunteers.

The Sikh temple is an interesting case to explore agency and contributions of culturally diverse minority groups in responding to emergencies and crisis, and their framing of 'volunteering.'

Key stakeholders in each organisation were contacted about the research and invited to participate. After confirming their participation, referrals were sought for suitable persons to interview. To ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives from the organisations, targeted participants for the interviews included members who have been involved in the organisation's operations and management, volunteer coordination, and as volunteers.

For VICSES, the first point of contact was the deputy controller for administration at the Brimbank SES Unit. An interview was arranged with the deputy controller who was responsible for recruitment and retention of other volunteers. Following further discussion around the aim of the research and considering internal discussions within the SES Central Region around recruitment and retention, it was agreed that an interview with a staff member at the Central Region would also be useful. The volunteer recruitment officer at the Central Region then connected the project team with the deputy controller for members at the Broadmeadows Unit, who also expressed interest to participate given the unit's experience in engaging volunteers from culturally diverse groups in the context of COVID-19.

There were three interview respondents in total for VICSES, involving volunteers with leadership roles from the Brimbank and Broadmeadows units and a staff member from the Central Region. The interviews were conducted online. Due to the impact of lockdown and time constraints, an interview with a culturally diverse volunteer that was initially arranged did not transpire.

For the Dal Baba Bidhi Chand Sikh Temple, the project team liaised with one of the volunteers involved in food relief distribution and was the main contact person for the Brimbank Melton Area office Department of Families, Fairness and Housing,¹² who collated information on emergency food relief operations in the west Melbourne area during COVID-19. An interview was arranged with this volunteer as well as a focus group with another eight Sikh volunteers. The interview and focus group were conducted face-to-face at the temple in Melton as preferred by the participants.

To complement the data collected from the interviews and focus group, site visits were arranged with the organisations. This methodological approach allowed for triangulation of data and corroboration of insights with participants. It also compelled critical reflection on the part of the researchers about implicit biases and assumptions around volunteering that were revealed during the research process.

At the time of data collection, however, a site visit to the Brimbank SES headquarters was not practicable due to the series of lockdowns and storms in Victoria that required the services of VICSES volunteers. Two site visits were undertaken at the Melton Sikh temple. These involved a tour inside the temple, which included a prayer room, classrooms for music and language classes, a fitness room, an industrial kitchen, and other facilities. During the tour of the premises, the volunteers pointed out some elements that symbolise the culture of volunteering in the Sikh community. In one of the visits, the researcher participated in the Langar, a community lunch that is served at the temple for free and is a main feature of Sikh volunteer activities involving food relief distribution.

The insights from the interviews, site observation, and focus group are presented in the following sections.

3 Case Studies

3.1. The Victoria State Emergency Service

The Civil Defence Organisation was established in 1950 and later renamed as the Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES) in 1975. Aside from conforming with other states, the new name also reflected the shift in focus from civil defence to more general emergency management. Volunteers and staff at VICSES respond to a range of emergency situations, from storm, flood, and landslide response to search and rescue.¹³

VICSES includes the head office, which is the State support unit, seven regional support units, and 142 local units. The local units are stand-alone and operate differently from each other. While there are paid staff at the regional support units and head office, the local units are run by volunteers, including leadership roles.

¹² In February 2021, the Department of Health and Human Services was split into two departments – the Department of Health and the Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing.

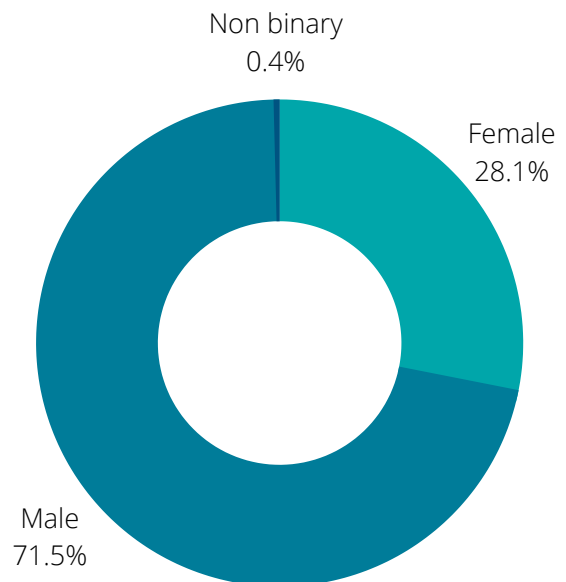
¹³ More details about VICSES are in the organisation's corporate profile, VICSES: An Introduction, available at https://www.ses.vic.gov.au/documents/112015/2169882/VIC_SES+an+introduction+-+Corporate+profile+2020.pdf/d80cabbd-87cd-414c-eb16-bdff0d6ada1

There are more than 5,000 VICSES volunteers across the state.

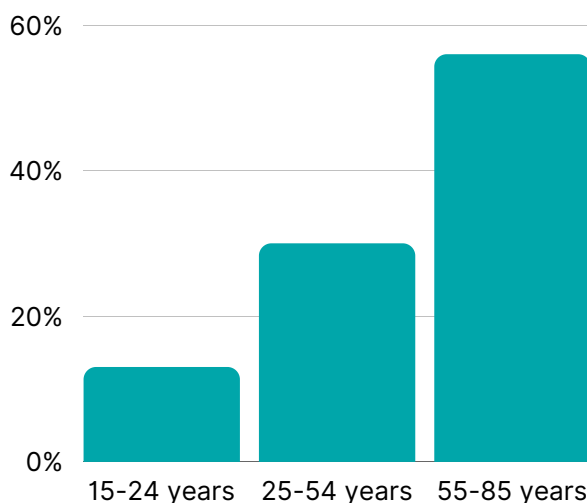
Over time, there has been an increase in the number of women and gender diverse people joining the service.

According to the VICSES 2020 corporate profile,¹⁴ around 33% of the volunteers are females. Updated 2021 data reported by the interview participants show that the leadership team consists of 28.1% females, 71.5% males and 0.4% non-binary. Another observation made by members interviewed for this study is that VICSES has a comparatively higher percentage of women membership compared to other emergency services in Victoria. In terms of age distribution, the corporate profile shows that 56% of volunteers across the state are aged 25-54 years, 30% are between 55-85 years old, and 13% are young volunteers aged 15-24 years.

Gender breakdown - leadership team (from 2021 data)



Age distribution of volunteers across VIC



Notably, there is no disaggregated data available to capture the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of volunteers.

Brimbank SES is one of the units of VICSES providing emergency assistance in Melbourne's west. Currently, there are 50 members, of which 10 are on probation and 8 in leadership positions. While there are no specifics on record, it is estimated that approximately 10% of volunteers come from culturally diverse backgrounds. The Brimbank unit is supported by the Central Region unit, which covers metropolitan Melbourne.

¹⁴ VIC SES: An Introduction, Corporate Profile 2020 (see link above)

3.2. The Melton Sikh Community

The Sikh community in Brimbank-Melton has been very active in supporting emergency relief during COVID-19. The Dal Baba Bidhi Chand Sikh Temple located in Melton, just like other Sikh temples around the world, is known for their charity work and is run entirely by volunteers. There are around 200 volunteers at the temple, of which an estimated 90% represent the Sikh faith and 10% are from other religious affiliations.

Volunteering is at the heart of the Sikh religion.

All members of the Sikh community are expected to participate in volunteering, irrespective of gender. It was reported that women are generally involved in food preparation and men oversee the delivery of food to people in need residing in the community.

Food is at the core of Sikh volunteering. The volunteers shared in the interview and focus group that most temples in India, where the Sikh religion originated, are run by volunteers who help in the cooking, serving, cleaning, and other tasks. The practice of Langar where free food is served to everyone who comes to the temple or out in the streets illustrates the Sikh community's commitment to help those in need. This practice has been adapted all over the world where Sikhs have migrated and settled.

Wherever they are located, a Sikh temple is known as place where food is always available not only to Sikhs but to the general community.

4 Key findings and insights

This study finds that volunteering is first and foremost relationship-based, particularly in local community volunteering. This is the case irrespective of the forms of volunteering engaged into, whether these are role-based or fluid volunteering (these broad forms of volunteering are discussed in 4.2). People join their local community groups as volunteers through connections, stay for connections, and are rewarded with new connections. Each of the insights discussed below lead back to this central finding.

4.1. Volunteering activities within culturally and linguistically diverse communities

One question that was of interest for the department is whether volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds are more inclined to do or are particularly interested in certain roles.

This study finds that that volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds take on a multitude of volunteering roles in the community. This means there are not specific or stereotypical activities that volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds are more inclined to do or are particularly interested in.

As an emergency management organisation, membership in VICSES indicates that volunteers are interested in providing emergency response. Although not specific to volunteers from culturally diverse groups, there are a range of roles that volunteers can do, including logistics, administration, and community engagement. There also are volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds who are in leadership positions whom the interview participants described as champions in promoting diversity and inclusion in the organisation.

At the Melton Sikh temple, there are various volunteering roles available, including participation in the food relief program and facilitating classes in music, Punjabi language, and traditional martial arts. However, the activities that volunteers engage in depends on opportunities available, their skills and resources, time availability, and the community needs at the time.

Assistance to communities and emergency services

For the Sikh community, core volunteering activities involved food relief operations. During the recent bushfires, the Sikh temple in Melton coordinated with other members of the wider Sikh community to assess the situation in the affected areas and identified needs in terms of emergency relief. They coordinated the collection and distribution of items to people in these areas. Aside from providing food and grocery hampers to people directly affected by the bushfires, they also provided cooked food to the emergency services responding to the situation, such as the Country Fire Authority.

Although these were not specific to the Sikh temple in Melton, there are also instances where the Sikh community in Victoria were known to have provided assistance during search and rescue operations of individuals lost in the outback. For example, when a young boy was lost in the mountains in 2020, volunteers from the Sikh community turned up to serve hot food and drinks to those conducting the search.

One interview participant related an experience when he was told how this initiative boosted the energy and motivation of the search team to continue looking for the boy:



I had a customer walk in and asked if I was Sikh. And he said to me his wife was the police officer in charge of finding the boy that was lost in the mountains. She said the Sikhs turned up there with food and hot drinks, and that put in an extra spring in their step just to see other people. Nothing to do with the police, nothing to do with the search group, just volunteer to bring food and hot drinks to them. And that encouraged them to go even further and push themselves even more to try to find that little boy.

- Manjit, Sikh community leader



At VICSES, there are a wide range of activities that volunteers can be involved in, including emergency provision, logistics, human resource, and administration. Responding to emergencies, such as property damage during storms, flood, or landslides is normally expected of members. There are also other roles that volunteers who are unable to participate in emergency response can perform. These include supporting operations by answering phone calls, managing the radio, or administrative assistance. When called for, VICSES volunteers also provide incidental support to other emergency services, including responding to fires.

COVID-19 Response – Active forms of volunteering to support community resilience and recovery

Emergency relief

During COVID-19, activities involving volunteers at the Melton Sikh temple rose significantly due to increased community demand. This included requests for food particularly from people in quarantine or isolating due to COVID-19 who had no means of obtaining food for themselves, as well as families struggling with basic needs. According to the volunteers, before the start of lockdown in 2020, the temple received a few calls a day or people just dropped in to get food for their neighbours. During COVID-19, the demand rose to around 40 to 50 calls a day requiring the amount of food prepared to increase dramatically.

The way food distribution worked also changed during COVID-19. Previously, with no restrictions in place, people could readily go to the temple to obtain packaged meals. As a result of COVID restrictions, a food delivery service was introduced in response to requests received from the community.

The roles that the volunteers carried out also had to be adapted to adhere to Victorian Government coronavirus restrictions. Social distancing measures and restrictions that had been put in place affected volunteering levels. To sustain the availability of food for the community, priests residing at the temple took over the kitchen and meal preparation, leaving delivery to volunteers.

The prompt response to the needs created by unprecedented circumstances, such as the coronavirus pandemic, shows the importance of the preparedness embedded in community organisations.

When demand for emergency relief surged, their existing core volunteering activities and aptitude to mobilise allowed them to scale up activities to meet the need.

Hub-and-spoke support

When COVID-19 started to spread in Victoria, VICSES volunteers were called upon to support the former Department of Health and Human Services set up testing sites and manage major exposure sites. The interview participants reported they were heavily involved in setting up marquees and delivering testing kits. They also helped perform logistics when lockdown was imposed on specific suburbs and public housing towers in Melbourne.

The interview participants, who helped at the towers, noted that it was from these specific instances that they gained a deeper insight into the importance of engaging volunteers and community leaders from culturally diverse groups to ensure effective communication with affected communities and households.



We were ringing members of our unit and saying “Hey, we need to get in contact with these people. What’s the best way of doing it?” And they were actively calling their friends, their community leaders and then they were pushing the message out. And that was more effective than the police coming in and saying, ‘Hey, come and get a vaccine’ or ‘Come and get your COVID tests’ because they are just not going to respond to that due to a variety of issues.

- Goldie, Broadmeadows Unit



4.2. Insights on volunteering in multicultural contexts

The study finds that different groups have different frames of ‘volunteering’ and what it entails for individuals and communities.

Motivations for volunteering

There are three dominant themes on what motivates volunteers – volunteering as a way of life, volunteering as a pathway to employment, and the desire to give back to the community.

Volunteering as a way of life for Sikh volunteers

‘It is in our bloodline, in our DNA.’ This was a resounding key theme during the interview and focus group with the Sikh volunteers as their main motivation for volunteering. Being a religious organisation, volunteering is viewed as an integral part of human life, in both a spiritual and moral sense.

Volunteering was described in both the interview and focus group as ‘ingrained in their culture and lifestyle’. It is passed on from one generation to the next as a way of life. Training starts in childhood as part of socialisation into the group’s customs.

This notion of volunteering as a way of life is one that is embedded in many collectivist cultures. Such action of 'helping without the expectation of financial return' may not carry the label of 'volunteering' as there is no equivalent term in their language.¹⁵

The idea that it is part of being in a community to help when one can that drives people to initiate activities for the common good without expecting monetary pay, activities that are generally understood in Australia as volunteering.



Man is here to help each other, not just himself.

- Sikh focus group participant

It is our blood. It is in our nature to volunteer as Sikhs. No matter what is happening, where it is happening... You may be just sitting at home watching something on the news. You just got the urge inside you saying I need to do something. And that is what drives us.

- Manjit, Sikh community leader



Volunteering as pathway to employment

While the main motivation for volunteering is the desire to help the community, some volunteers at the Sikh temple also utilise their volunteering experience when looking for jobs.

For example, those who want to become chefs can gain experience and familiarity of how things work in an industrial kitchen by volunteering at the temple. The head chef, who is also a volunteer, guides them through what they need to know and do. Since all the food preparation is done in large quantities at the temple kitchen, it is a great opportunity for them to contribute to the community and at the same time, gain skills and experience for future employment.

When they move on to seek paid jobs, they are given references to support their job applications.

For volunteers at VICSES, there are a wide range of courses that can be undertaken. Members are required to have at least 60% attendance at the weekly training, where they learn new skills and build their confidence in volunteering. Some members utilise their volunteering experience at VICSES to further their career in other fields.

Giving back to the community

VICSES had conducted surveys within units to capture the motivations of members in joining and retaining their commitment to the service. One of the primary motivations identified by volunteers was the desire to help the wider community.

For many of the volunteers, being able to assist people in emergency situations and help rebuild communities that had been ravaged by disasters is a rewarding experience and the main driver to join the service as well continuing their involvement.

It is important to note though that the VICSES surveys targeted all members and the information shared by the respondents in terms of what motivated their members to volunteer was not distinct for culturally diverse or mainstream groups. However, one interview participant with broad experience in volunteer recruitment shared his observation of volunteers from culturally diverse background joining VICSES:



The main motivation is being able to help the community. It is very instilled that they want to give back and help and find a way to do that. Based on my experience, I would say CALD volunteers are skewed towards wanting to give back, less so the carer aspect in terms of having that experience in emergency services.

- Michael, Brimbank SES



Staying in volunteering

While people have clear motivations for volunteering, more interestingly, the impact and value of the experience surpass what motivates volunteers in the first place. Different frames of volunteering shape people's expectations of the types of activities they would engage in, and in turn, the expectations of what they would get from the experience sustain their participation. For many, the immeasurable outcomes of relationships built keep them on their volunteering journey.

Camaraderie and sense of belonging



You stand beside someone wearing orange and already have that level of understanding because you know that this person has also woken up at 3am to help somebody for something. That is why people stay.

- Goldie, Broadmeadows Unit



Once involved with the VICSES, camaraderie and sense of belonging is one of the primary factors identified as to why volunteers stay within the organisation. As described by interview participants, there is an instantaneous friendship generated between volunteers in an organisation that provides critical support to the community during emergencies. The participants also noted that the comradeship within VICSES develops regardless of the differences among members. The organisation has been described as one where members bring in a diversity of skills and professional backgrounds, which VICSES utilises to bring about that synergy towards its reputation as a leader in emergency management.

Sparking mutually supportive networks



One of the biggest reasons I volunteer is not only to help the community but also because I have made a lot of friends that are just very different to the types of people that I would normally be friends with. And that is something that I think retains members because they are in an awesome group of people that are different from each other.

- Michael, Brimbank Unit

Regardless of whether you disagree with them about politics, or we are not good friends, they are there for you because they know that you will go out to help someone who is having the worst day of their life.

- Goldie, Broadmeadows Unit



Continuing from above, friendship also manifests in the informal support that members give to each other. The interview participants related stories of members who could not speak English very well when they joined the service but were able to improve their language skills through their interaction with and the support of other members. They said volunteers have stayed in the service for many years. This kind of support is particularly important not only in attracting volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds but also in sustaining their membership and, hence, their representation in the organisation.

Volunteering as a learning opportunity

Some volunteers utilise the volunteering experience as a pathway to paid employment. Developing skills through the experience also serves as motivation to keep volunteering. Skills obtained include technical skills, particularly for VICSES volunteers, as well as communication and interpersonal skills through their interaction with other volunteers and community members.

Building bridges for social cohesion

As mentioned in the previous section, volunteering among culturally diverse groups, such as the Sikh community, is considered as a way of life that is passed on from one generation to the next through socialisation. Participation in volunteering therefore gives volunteers not only a sense of 'doing', but also a sense of 'being.' It allows volunteers to create connections among themselves and with the wider community. This sense of connection is a significant element of successful settlement in Australia.

For multicultural groups, the culture of volunteering they manifest as a group is also a reflection of their migration journey. Among the Sikh community, for instance, their food relief operations have stemmed from the practice of Langar, which originated in India. This notion of volunteering as a way of life and that they engage in wherever they find themselves in the world speaks of migrants trans-localising their own culture of volunteering. Subsequently this integrates this into the mainstream of building social cohesion in the Australian way of life.

Previous studies argue that culturally diverse groups tend to gravitate towards intra-community volunteering.¹⁶ The Sikh community as a faith organisation is also the preferred site of volunteering for its members. However, the impact of their volunteering activities goes beyond their group. The case study shows that volunteering in the same religious or cultural group is secondary to the primary goal, which is to help whoever is in need in the community.

Reframing forms of volunteering

A dominant discourse in the volunteering sector is categorising types of volunteering into formal versus informal. There is a strong assumption and default association between 'informal' volunteering and forms of volunteering in multicultural groups. For example, the State of Volunteering in Victoria (2020) Report highlights the need to research volunteer patterns among diverse groups, such as informal volunteering.¹⁷ The AMES Australia (2020) Report also suggests a data gap on informal volunteering activities within culturally and linguistically diverse communities.¹⁸

This study posits a different starting point and framing based on the findings. We re-frame the different forms of volunteering to better reflect community practice and avoid implicit disenfranchising connotations of the "informal" level.

We posit two different active – and legitimate – forms of volunteering:

role-based volunteering experiences || **fluid volunteering experiences**

These two general forms of volunteering experiences occur in both established organisations such as VICSES and multicultural groups.

For a structured organisation such as VICSES, the process of recruiting and retaining volunteers is based on roles and thus formalised with required assessments and compliance checks. Membership maintenance requirements are also in place as part of the organisation's operating procedures. In role-based volunteering, which is more often found in mainstream organisations, volunteers enter a transactional relationship with the organisation. A volunteer brings in skills, time, and labour according to the roles or positions they apply for. In return, they obtain training, support, experience, and an organisational affiliation, in addition to the social connections and other identified benefits of volunteering.¹⁹

¹⁶ Peucker, M. (2018). *Muslim community volunteering: the civic-religious 'culture of benevolence' and its sociopolitical implications*. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46:11, 2367-2386.

¹⁷ State of Volunteering in Victoria 2020

¹⁸ AMES Australia (2020)

¹⁹ While volunteering participation is unpaid, there are non-monetary rewards or incentives that volunteers can gain from the experience, referred to as psychic income.

Role-based volunteering also normally involves an agreement, which stipulates the duration within which volunteering is undertaken for the organisation. Currently, the VICSES Central Region is implementing what they describe as a hard-line requirement of 3 years commitment to the service. According to the volunteer recruitment officer, this requirement is explained to potential members at the outset, before they decide to join the service, in the hope that understanding the level of commitment and expectations will also inspire them to stay longer. This strategy is seen as a way for VICSES to get the value for money spent on recruitment and training of volunteers. There are also minimum number of hours required by each unit of their volunteers. At the Brimbank SES, for example, active members are rostered to be on call at specific hours on a weekly basis.

On the other hand, a main feature of volunteering in the Sikh community is a fluid volunteering experience that is not dependent on specific roles. Rather, volunteers are bound by needs of the current circumstance, the organisation, the community, and capability of the individual volunteers. Terms, such as recruitment and retention, are not commonly used. In contrast to role-based formal volunteering where organisations advertise for volunteering roles with position descriptions and a selection process, volunteering in the Sikh community does not have an official signup process. The activities undertaken during food relief operations do not call for a list of selection criteria, but a general condition of “If you are available to do this task at this this time, please join.” In place of a regular roster of activities, they may have a list of persons doing assigned tasks on an ad hoc basis.

Word-of-mouth call outs are done within the group and their network in place of volunteer position advertisements.

When there are activities where volunteers are needed, requests are put out into the WhatsApp group chat or on the Facebook page. Members then share the information through their own social media accounts. This way, it gets circulated to their networks outside the temple. People then indicate if they are the available at the dates and time when volunteers are needed.



With fluid volunteering, roles are not delineated or prescribed upfront to be filled like job positions. There is no need to match volunteers to roles that require specific skills. There is not an expectation on volunteers to be available to work a required number of hours. Anyone can offer to do a task they are capable of and willing to do at the time the task needs to be done.

For volunteering roles at the temple, there is no formal list of tasks to do. Accordingly, members just look for tasks that need to be done and do them.

Table 1. A comparison of role-based and fluid volunteering

	Role-based volunteering	Fluid volunteering
Ethos/narrative	Exchange/transaction 'Free will' Input of time and labour Psychic income	Volunteering as a way of life Civic/community connection Sense of place and 'being' (not just 'doing')
Volunteering experience	Bounded by role Contractual	Open Bounded by needs of circumstance, the organisation, community, and capability of the individual volunteer
Tools and approaches	Human resources management where volunteer management is based on recruitment, retention, reward, and recognition framework	Culture-based, customary procedures Hands on deck (volunteers find a role that they can do, where people are needed) Mobility (moving through role to role)

4.3. Barriers to volunteer participation for culturally diverse groups

Existing literature shows that while culturally diverse groups are more likely to engage in fluid (so-called informal) volunteering, they continue to experience barriers to accessing role-based volunteering opportunities in mainstream organisations. A recent publication by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute specifies some of these barriers that emergency service organisations, such as VICSES, grapple with:²⁰ Additional obstacles from the case studies are discussed below. These barriers arguably result in a higher degree of intra-community volunteering by multicultural cohorts as their communities' volunteering practices are more suitable and amenable.

Low uptake of volunteering opportunities in mainstream organisations

An observation of the interview participants from VICSES is the low uptake of membership from culturally diverse groups. As a result, culturally diverse groups are not widely represented within the service even in units located in areas where there is a significant number of culturally diverse groups in the population. This is an issue that has prompted ongoing discussions within the various units and at the regional level.

One suggested explanation for this low uptake is the lack of awareness among culturally diverse groups about the existence of VICSES and the volunteering opportunities available. This indicates that while VICSES is relatively well known, considering that it is a leading organisation in terms of emergency management, many people from culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly the newly arrived, still do not know of it.

²⁰ Prentice, T. (2021). *To serve and protect: Bringing diversity to Australia's emergency services* (Essay – edition 4). Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. Available at <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/publication/serve-and-protect>.

During COVID-19, there was a steep increase in inquiries for new membership within the central region.

They received over 5000 inquiries at the start of the pandemic and are currently receiving around 50 inquiries a week.

This suggests that there is widespread awareness of volunteering opportunities within the organisation. However, data is not collected to show how many of these inquiries are from culturally diverse groups. The inquiries do not necessarily translate into membership as applicants still need to go through a process of assessments and exploration of the extent of commitment involved before they can be accepted into the service.

In terms of engaging new volunteers, interview participants identified a lack of representation of culturally diverse groups within existing VICSES membership as a challenge to engaging new volunteers from these groups. This could also be more pertinently seen as an outcome of the barriers experienced by culturally diverse people. A reflection made during the interviews is that this lack of diversity and the service being visibly white can create a perception that SES is not a welcoming organisation. One of the principles of recruitment at VICSES is that no one is turned away provided they meet the requirements for membership, yet there is a need to make the organisation more visibly inclusive to attract volunteers from the wider multicultural community.

Reactive rather than proactive approach

While VICSES has undergone significant changes towards diversity and inclusion in terms of gender and ability, more work needs to be done in terms of engaging culturally diverse groups in volunteering. At an organisational level, one of the identified barriers to engaging volunteers from culturally diverse groups into VICSES is a more reactive than proactive approach to community engagement. They go out into the community when and where they are invited to speak about the organisation and what they do. This is true particularly for the Brimbank Unit, as well as a general observation within the central region. While they also do promotions through online platforms, such as Facebook, the participants recognise that these strategies do not guarantee reaching a culturally diverse audience to raise awareness about volunteering opportunities at VICSES.

The Greater Dandenong Unit was cited as an example of good practice in terms of proactively engaging culturally diverse groups.

According to the interview participants, members at that unit specifically target groups by visiting places, such as temples, and meeting with different groups to recruit members.

This strategy has been successful in gaining interests in VICSES from a range of culturally diverse groups in the local area.

Generally, there is a lack of resources to plan for and undertake activities to proactively invite prospective volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds. At the unit level, particularly, members are volunteers themselves who are occupied with responding to call outs and recruiting fellow volunteers. In times when emergency situations quickly escalate and persist, such as COVID-19, thinking of ways to specifically engage culturally diverse volunteers goes down the list of priorities.

That is not to say that the units are not exerting effort to recruit a diverse range of volunteers, not only in terms of skills set, but also of cultural and linguistic background. There is a growing recognition within VICSES that engaging volunteers from culturally diverse groups will help ensure that the various units provide effective, efficient, and responsive services in their localities. Discussions are ongoing at senior and frontline levels, and the regional and local unit levels, about the need to take a more proactive approach to identify and breakdown the barriers that prevent multicultural community members from joining the organisation.

Language and cultural barriers

Lack of English fluency can be a barrier for potential volunteers from culturally diverse groups. Training and assessments being in English and the use of technical terminology and acronyms in VICSES also adds to the level of complexity that needs to be navigated.

Some of the units have tried to address this barrier by using plain language and minimising the use of acronyms during training. Funding is available to support English language skills development among volunteers and units can apply for this through their regional office.



If someone is not really keen on writing in English, that doesn't mean that they cannot do the job. We need people out there who want to help their community...We need to make those allowances in their assessments while making sure we are still in line with all those RTO aspects that we need to maintain. And that is something we have been working really hard towards.

- Goldie, Broadmeadows Unit



While there aren't many VICSES publications in-language, some units have started developing translated materials for distribution to the public. For instance, the Broadmeadows Unit has produced a flowchart on when to call VICSES during a flood or storm, which is translated into eight languages and utilised by councils across the state. As a result, there has been an increase in individuals who speak the language used in the materials inquiring to join the unit.

For the Sikh community, volunteers are able to work around the lack of English fluency. While most of the volunteers at the Melton Sikh temple can speak and understand English, those that cannot stay within the temple complex and perform equally vital volunteering roles where they communicate with community members in their own language.

Facilities and operational requirements

Another concern is facilities at VICSES headquarters, particularly the lack of separate toilet and change rooms for male and females.

The unisex facilities may not be suitable for the use of people from certain cultural and religious groups and could deter potential volunteers from joining the service. This is recognised as a barrier and discussions are underway to ensure that facilities accommodate the various needs of their members.

Another identified barrier relates to the uniform requirement for VICSES volunteers on emergency response. For women who wear hijab, they can wear one in orange colour to match with the uniform under their personal protective equipment. However, people who wear headdresses, such as turbans, find it difficult to wear helmets, which are required in a number of VICSES activities as part of safety protocols.

A number of volunteers, particularly newly arrived residents, do not have a car and the unit headquarters are located some distance away from public transport. This prevents them from travelling to the headquarters for training and responding to call outs. However, local units can manage this through carpooling.

Discriminatory attitudes



We've had member who are unable to attend training because of Ramadan. And you get these comments, like "Why are they not here for training?" And we were like "Because of Ramadan."

- Goldie, Broadmeadows Unit



The interview participants also noted that some members of the organisation are not that open to changes in procedures and the flexibility needed to accommodate cultural considerations for those that come from culturally diverse backgrounds. There are also members who are less welcoming of volunteers who come from multicultural communities and who speak languages other than English.

The experience of discrimination from other members can be an obstacle to retaining volunteers from culturally diverse groups.

Lack of time due to family and work commitments

As members of the Sikh community are expected to try to help out whenever possible and in any way they can, the only barrier to volunteering that the research identified is lack of time due to work or other commitments. According to the interview and focus group participants, there is no barrier to volunteering in terms of gender or age. However, they also make sure that volunteers carry out tasks that are within their capacity. The elderly volunteers who want to help in the kitchen are looked after so they do not do tasks that may potentially cause injury.

“

We try to find them a position where it is easy for them to do what they are doing, because they still want to do something.

- Manjit, Sikh community leader

”

4.4. Why engage culturally diverse groups in volunteering

Besides addressing barriers to engaging culturally diverse groups in volunteering, the case studies also show that there is a need to promote volunteer participation in these communities as well as acknowledge the involvement that already exists. Below are insights from the interview participants regarding the significant roles and contributions that culturally diverse volunteers can bring into their organisation. These insights support Scanlon Foundation’s analysis on the need to attract and retain a more diversified volunteer pool within Australia’s emergency services.²¹

Leadership and mobilisation skills

“

We’ve seen how powerful they can be in emergency, during response and recovery, especially during COVID. Getting them involved is going to be a huge part of SES moving forward.

- Goldie, Broadmeadows Unit

”

As observed by the participants, across the VICSES are volunteers and members of leadership teams who come from culturally diverse backgrounds who have made invaluable contributions to the organisation. From an emergency management perspective, there is an excellent opportunity to involve volunteers from culturally diverse groups who can contribute to the aims of the organisation to meet the diverse needs of the communities that VICSES serves.

²¹ Prentice, T. (2021).

The experience of VICSES in engaging their multicultural volunteers, as they managed the COVID-19 hub-and-spoke sites, shows that people from culturally diverse groups have the capacity to mobilise their communities in times of emergency, for response and recovery. In the context of COVID-19 when important messages need to reach communities urgently in order to contain the spread of disease and maintain the health and safety of the population, volunteers can serve as link to their community leaders and key members who will then drive the message out into their own communities.

Organisations recruiting culturally diverse volunteers allows them to tap into the assets of multicultural communities, such as community leaders who can serve as a go-between and can increase awareness of cultural considerations in the context of emergency response. One interview participant shared her insights from VICSES involvement in responding to the needs of the residents in the Melbourne Towers required to isolate to contain the spread of coronavirus.



I have learnt so much from that experience. That you need to tap into those community leaders to have them as the go-between and explain to us things like “You need to order the right meat.” And what was delivered was not necessarily going to be the food that people in the towers would eat.

- Priscilla, Central Region



Culturally responsive and informed services

Aside from skills they can offer, volunteers from culturally diverse groups add value by providing opportunity for closer connection with the communities that organisations, such as VICSES, serve. As seen from the experience of those involved in managing COVID-19 hub-and-spoke sites, efforts and resources can go to waste if they do not meet the cultural requirements of people they aim to help. To provide effective response in these contexts, taking on board cultural considerations is front and centre of any organisations working with culturally diverse groups.

As these groups are more likely to listen to their cultural leaders, there is a huge opportunity to collaborate with multicultural community leaders for ways to successfully reach out to their members.

Maximising relational networks

As mentioned by participants, people from culturally diverse background have a strong motivation to help their communities through volunteering. As an example, the contributions that the Sikh community has been making attest to the commitment of multicultural and multifaith groups to contribute to the common good and create a positive impact to society. The case studies also show that the relational networks of multicultural and multifaith groups enable fluid volunteering to be readily activated for prompt and effective response to the impact of the pandemic and other unprecedented events.

Engaging the diverse groups and supporting their volunteering activities is an opportunity to utilise their existing social and cultural capital towards COVID-19 recovery.

4.5. Critical success factors for engaging culturally diverse volunteers

There are a number of important elements that organisations can make provision for to successfully engage volunteers from culturally diverse groups.

Adopting a proactive approach to recruitment

For VICSES, a proactive approach is seen as a way to build awareness among culturally diverse groups about volunteering opportunities in the organisation. This means identifying groups in the local areas that the units usually have limited engagements with and arranging information sessions with them. This not only builds awareness but also increases the visibility of the organisation as welcoming and inclusive of culturally diverse people.

The Sikh community's food distribution and relief operations also illustrate a proactive approach to responding to emergency situations. This takes the form of mobilising their volunteers and existing networks to provide a prompt response to the needs of the community.

Promoting diversity and inclusion through leadership and champions

Leadership in volunteer-involving organisations play a critical role in pivoting their organisations to become more open and inclusive, not just in principle but more importantly in practice. Those in leadership positions can serve as role models with inclusive attitudes and approaches towards diverse members of the organisation and the community.

It is also important to have champions of change within the organisation. Within VICSES, for example, members who show prejudice or make discriminatory comments against CALD people can be challenged by fellow 'champion' members. They can be positive examples of modelling behaviours and actions that make the organisation more welcoming, culturally safe, and supportive of members from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Building volunteering confidence

To engage culturally diverse people in volunteering it is also important that they have confidence in their skills and ability to undertake volunteering activities. Among the Sikh volunteers, volunteering confidence is built through informal mentorship and demonstration. When people are not confident enough, they are encouraged to do as much as they can and are guided by other volunteers on how to do things until they are able to do these on their own. In a formal organisation, such as VICSES, volunteer confidence is built through the provision of a comprehensive training program covering aspects of the volunteering role including accredited certification and specialist courses.

Confidence is boosted through practice and supported by mentoring and a buddy system.

Breaking barriers through flexible arrangements

Another important element to engaging multicultural groups is making adjustments and accommodation for culturally diverse volunteers to ensure a sense of cultural safety.

While COVID-19 has reduced volunteering opportunities for many organisations it has enabled the Sikh community to ramp up their food relief activities. They were also able to quickly adapt their food distribution in accordance with the COVID-19 health guidelines while meeting increased demand. They also adapted language barriers, which has been identified as a barrier to volunteering for people from culturally diverse backgrounds. They ensured that volunteers who lack English conversational skills but performed critical roles were still able to carry out such activities by remaining within the temple premises. The group also utilised members with English proficiency. A volunteer at the Melton Sikh temple who had a good command of English was assigned the liaison role with the former Department of Health and Human Services to update food relief information.



We have really got a lot of work to do to be able to be more open and accepting of anyone that walks in the door. We still have a lot of work to do on the CALD community to encourage them to join. But we also must get a lot of our stuff done in the background to make it easier for them. We need to have the facilities. We need to be adaptable and have things organised before we encourage them to come and join.

- Priscilla, Central Region



For VICSES, addressing the barriers to engaging culturally diverse volunteers includes making adjustments and allowances in their procedures. This includes using plain language during assessments and training for volunteers who are not very proficient in English but have the necessary skills to undertake emergency response, a proactive and flexible approach to community engagement, and making modifications to VICSES uniform and facilities. However, addressing barriers to ensure that volunteers from culturally diverse groups can thrive within the organisation needs to be done at the outset, before carrying out extensive recruitment campaigns.

Building on the strengths and resources of multicultural groups

Along with passion to give back to the wider community and to contribute to the common good, culturally diverse groups also have assets that can be utilised particularly during COVID response and recovery.

Members of culturally diverse groups can provide the significant and appropriate cultural lens to policies and procedures. They also can help ensure that communications and key messages reaching their communities are clear and concise.

From the experience of the Sikh community, the funds and in-kind resources that members pool together allow them to sustain not only their temple activities but also their food relief activities. During site visits to the temple in Melton, the volunteers highlighted some items that exemplify such initiatives. For example, a table had been positioned at the entrance of the building where members put in-kind donations, such as ingredients for the food prepared and distributed by the temple. Also pointed out was a commercial fridge recently donated by a member, which was a significant addition to their kitchen equipment.

Due to the fluid nature of volunteering, members are able to volunteer within their own time and capacity. This allows for participation in volunteering that is not restricted by specific roles or volunteering 'contracts.'

One observation made during the focus group is that often there are more volunteers than volunteer roles.

This suggests that a culture of volunteering exists which may be different from the conventional notion of volunteering in Australia.



Relationships and connections are vital to successful and inclusive volunteering

This study finds that volunteering is first and foremost relationship-based, particularly in local community volunteering. This is the case irrespective of whether it is role-based or fluid volunteering.

People join their local community groups as volunteers through connections, stay for connections, and are rewarded with new connections.

One of the benefits obtained from volunteering is the sense of belonging and place. This is of particular importance to newly arrived, culturally diverse people looking for connections with their local community and for opportunities to contribute to society.²² Being able to access such opportunities to belong and contribute to society through volunteering helps in terms of community connections and social cohesion which are also linked to mental health and wellbeing. It also helps culturally diverse volunteers become fluent in English, understand the culture, and make the transition into Australian life.²³



At VICSES, volunteers gain camaraderie and sense of belonging through membership in the organisation and, expectedly, participation in activities that meet the needs of the wider community. This sense of belonging is also a resounding theme during the focus group with the Sikh volunteers. In addition to the sense of fulfillment they gain from being able to contribute to the welfare of others, they are also aware of the appreciation that the Sikh community has been receiving from the public. In a way, their volunteering activities have put the Sikh community “on the map.”

²² AMES Australia (2021). *Migrants keen to volunteer and fit in – study finds*. Available at <https://amesnews.com.au/latest-articles/migrants-keen-to-volunteer-and-fit-it-study-finds/>

²³ Prentice, T. (2021).

5 Implications for policy and practice

Re-framing volunteering for engagement with multicultural communities

The findings on volunteering as a way of life should give decision makers in the sector and in government pause to re-think current approaches to championing and engagement of 'CALD volunteering.' The study supports previous research findings, as well as anecdotal evidence from Volunteer West's long-time engagement with community organisations, that there is already a healthy culture of volunteering in certain multicultural and multifaith communities. This challenges assumptions and current programming around the need to promote volunteering in these groups. Volunteer engagement should go beyond promotion of volunteering opportunities to include acknowledging, learning about and leveraging the culture of volunteering that exists within culturally diverse communities.

In the ethos of respecting the agency and potential of the communities, future engagement with - and therefore learning from - multicultural and multifaith communities can begin with: What are the ways to encourage volunteering as a 'way of life'? What are the approaches to socialising a volunteering ethos? Pursuing such lines of inquiry then advances the practices and approaches to promoting volunteering across our diverse communities that does not rest on a presumption of a deficit of volunteering engagement or low participation rates in 'formal' roles.

Replace the notion of 'informal' volunteering with 'fluid volunteering'

'Informal' volunteering is often associated with culturally diverse volunteering. There is an implicit disenfranchisement in such terminology, suggesting that activities undertaken are of lesser value than 'formal' volunteering activities. Participation in "informal" activities is not accurately depicted as volunteering in official reports, such as the Australian census statistics.²⁵

A notion of 'fluid volunteering' more aptly describes a practice where volunteers engage in activities that meet the needs of the community, whether these are within or outside structured organisational settings.

This research supports Think Impact's findings about the potential of volunteering, when viewed as participatory action, in promoting and strengthening social cohesion. While there is no clear-cut definition of social cohesion, the report proposes a model that comprises the domains of social participation, social relations, and focus on the common good.²⁶

²⁴ AMES Australia (2021).

²⁵ AMES Australia (2020).

²⁶ Think Impact (2020).

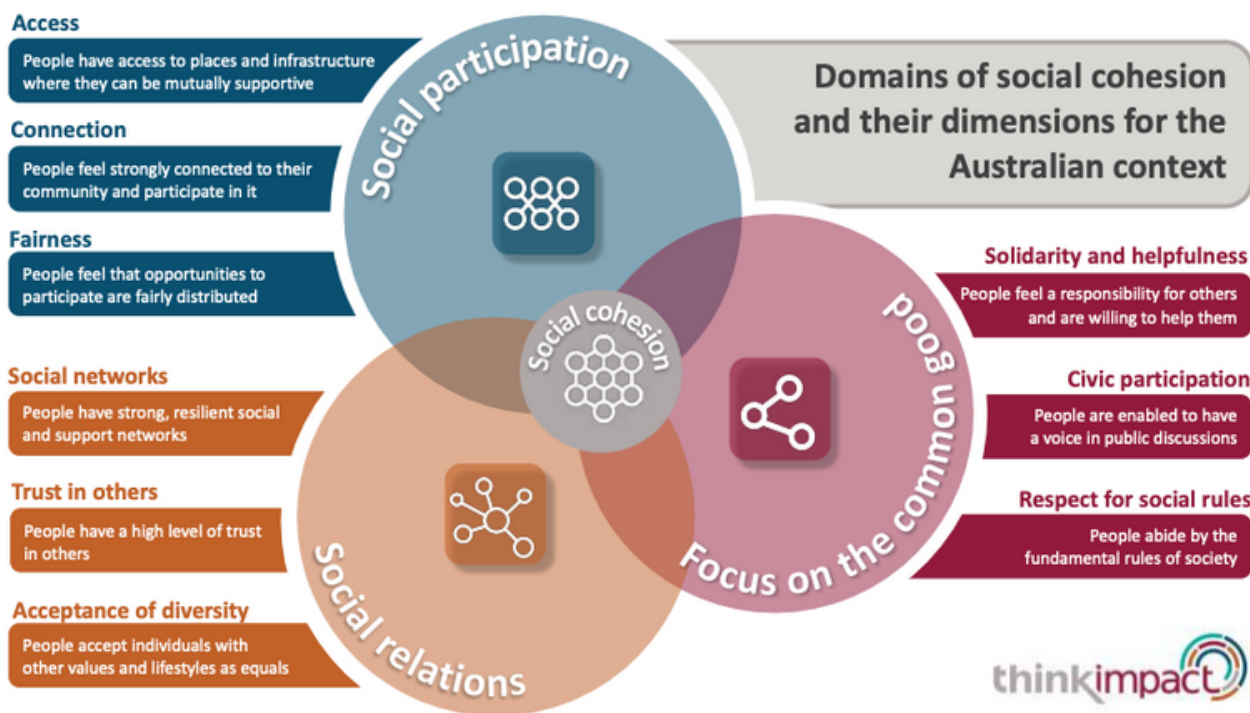


Figure 1. Social cohesion domains and dimensions for the Australian context (Think Impact, 2020; p. 28)

The Think Impact report also suggests participatory action encompasses a broader notion of volunteering and goes beyond the formal-informal categorisation to include incidental engagement where people act in mutual support and get involved in group activities. These forms of participation all contribute to social cohesion by bringing communities together. The figure below shows the mosaic of volunteering and social cohesion, which usefully illustrates different forms of participation.²⁷



Figure 2. Participatory Action Dimensions (Think Impact, 2020; p. 50)

²⁷ Think Impact (2020).

Building on the perspective of participatory action, leveraging the notion and concept of fluid volunteering is one way to deal with the expectations of spontaneous, ad-hoc, irregular volunteering that is being now sought. The demands for fluid volunteering arrangements, both in terms of time commitment and tasks, roles, and activities performed reflect a systemic issue of lack of time due to work pressures, and family and other commitments. These align with the demands to develop a fluid and flexible work culture spurred on by the pandemic.

Collaboration is key to diversity and inclusion in volunteering

Relationship building and collaboration is a significant aspect of engaging multicultural groups. Volunteering Australia noted that while many organisations would like to engage volunteers from culturally diverse groups, some of them are unsure how to do so.²⁸ Yet these organisations have the power to design inclusive volunteering environments. This study, as well as research by Scanlon Foundation,²⁹ show that mainstream organisations, such as VICSES, acknowledge the need for them to be more inclusive, but are still working out how to turn this in to action. This gap is an opportunity to build partnerships with multicultural and multifaith groups, as well as volunteer resource centres, for training, mentoring, and redesigning inclusive volunteer programs that acknowledge the value of fluid volunteering.

6 Recommendations

From the learning and insights gained from the case studies, as well as from Volunteer West's engagements with community organisations involving volunteers from culturally diverse groups, the following are opportunities and suggested strategies that can be utilised to engage volunteering with multicultural communities to better respond to and support Melbourne's West during times of emergency and also during preparedness and recovery phases. It is important to note that these recommendations are based on the two case studies, existing literature, and Volunteer West's experience in providing support services to volunteers and volunteer engagement practitioners (e.g., coordinators and managers). There is scope to broaden the evidence base by including more "volunteer voices" from other types of multicultural community organisations.



²⁸ Volunteering Australia (2021). *Involving volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds*.

²⁹ Prentice, T. (2021).



6.1. Acknowledge fluid volunteering as a legitimate form

For Government

Provide flexible funding and explore not-for-profit governance and regulatory models in order to provide supporting mechanisms for fluid-volunteering to flourish.

Revise census questions to accurately capture the range of volunteering activities performed by culturally diverse communities outside of formal structured settings. This recognises and elevates forms of fluid volunteering that are not being currently recognised.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Revisit the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement to account for the dynamics and impact of fluid-volunteering across a range of culturally diverse communities.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Document the trends in volunteering among culturally diverse groups to account for community participation that contribute to community development and social cohesion, including those that are ad hoc, intergenerational, and relational rather than transactional.

6.2. Elevate fluid volunteering through appreciative inquiry

For Government

Promote, champion, and fund action-research studies to deepen understanding of practices using new framing of 'fluid-volunteering' (replacing 'informal' volunteering framing). This study has taken the first step in reframing the language and orientation of the sector through the concept of fluid-volunteering. There is still a significant data gap in understanding the role of fluid-volunteering in culturally diverse communities.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Undertake further research to deepen and broaden our understanding of the dynamics and impact of fluid-volunteering across a range of diverse communities. The research could be co-funded community-led research or evaluation wrapped around a volunteering project, undertaken by community-researchers or students interns (with stipends).

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Develop new practice and professional development resources, such as training and toolkits to support fluid volunteering. These include program evaluation that employs meaningful measurement of relationships and connections created during volunteer engagement, and a less focus on counting number of volunteers, number of volunteering hours,³⁰ and number of volunteer celebration events held.

³⁰ Murikumthara, D. (2021). *Moving to meaningful measurement: Three themes from our third Reimagining Government webinar of 2021*. Available at <https://medium.com/centre-for-public-impact/moving-to-meaningful-measurement-three-themes-from-our-third-reimagining-government-webinar-of-e0a2236229f7>

6.3. Audit and review of policies and processes towards mechanisms to ensure diversity and inclusion

For Government

Adopt a policy that elevates fluid volunteering as instrumental to building participation and social cohesion. This policy lens then appropriately resources multicultural and multi-faith actors (individuals as well as groups) as community-builders that proactively build connections to 'the mainstream.' This means 'outreach' is as much an activity by the multicultural and multi-faith groups as much as it is in the realm of government and traditional service providers.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Changing and adapting practices within organisations to break down visible and invisible barriers begin with an acknowledgement that those barriers exist. Organisations will need support to identify those barriers (particularly the inadvertent ones), which can be done through audit and review of operational practices and policies.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Identify and raise for amendment policies and practices that create barriers for volunteers from culturally diverse groups.

6.4. Address barriers to volunteer participation

For Government

Allocate funding aimed to equip community organisations to address barriers to engaging volunteers from culturally diverse groups. Funding is needed not only for the material items or building changes that may be required, such as separate change rooms, adapted uniforms, but also for the soft skills training required to develop inclusive volunteering environments.

Resource the development and promotion of advocacy resources, such as videos and posters, to build awareness and appreciation of the range of volunteering that culturally diverse people do.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Improve facilities and facilitate adjustments for multicultural and multifaith cohorts, including gender-specific toilets, variety of uniform options, translated materials and communications, practical rather than English language-based assessments and utilising existing funding support for English language development of volunteers.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Collaborate with volunteers in designing approaches to developing cross-cultural awareness and ensuring cultural safety.

Use plain English and minimise acronyms and jargon during training and assessments.



6.5. Strengthen the evidence base for culturally diverse volunteering and impact

For Government

Earmark funding for the mapping of diversity data (cultural background, gender, age, ability) of volunteers across both role-based and fluid volunteering in the Brimbank and Melton local government areas. This can be done in collaboration with community organisations that engage and support volunteers.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Breaking down barriers include collecting information on the diversity of volunteers within the organisation to better understand and support them. Conduct research to obtain disaggregated data on key demographic groups with the aim of gaining insights into the various ways that they contribute to community development and social cohesion through volunteering.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Develop new tools to better capture the range of practices and impacts of culturally diverse volunteering.

6.6. Proactive and sustained engagement with culturally diverse groups

For Government

Support the development of a framework for local partnerships among government agencies, regional peak volunteer organisations, mainstream organisations, and multicultural groups that highlights local and active forms of volunteering practiced (such as fluid volunteering) and to stem the decline in 'formal' role-based volunteering. This can be integrated within the Victorian Volunteer Strategy, which is currently in development.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Build institutional linkages between mainstream organisations like VICSES and multicultural groups. Collaborate with multicultural and multifaith groups to ensure culturally sensitive and appropriate response to emergency and other critical situations. These relationships require ongoing resourcing and support. Projects such as Volunteer West's WestSeed³¹ project have the potential to build mutually supportive networks between mainstream organisations and multicultural and multifaith organisations in Melbourne's west.

Victoria University's 'Change Makers: Empowering sports to enhance social inclusion for migrants and refugees'³² project is a model that with appropriate funding, could support mainstream community organisations across Melbourne's west to build inclusive environments for volunteering.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Collaborate with local government units and regional peak bodies, such as Volunteer West, to develop diverse and inclusive volunteer engagement strategies. These include inclusion training and developing inclusive position descriptions for role-based volunteer positions,³³ as well as participation in projects such as ChangeMakers, WestSeed, and Volunteer Managers Network.

³¹ For more details, see <https://www.volunteerwest.org.au/westseed-community-map>

³² Changemakers is a federally funded project to increase the social inclusion of migrants and refugees in sporting clubs in Melbourne's West. The project engages with clubs to develop context-based solutions to increase the inclusion of migrants and refugees at your clubs. It is a partnership between Victoria University, Volunteer West, Brimbank City Council and Welcoming Australia.

³³ Volunteer West offers inclusion training and a PD Pivot service. For more details, see <https://www.volunteerwest.org.au>.

WestSeed is an innovative project that supports and connects multicultural groups in Melbourne’s West. It helps organisations find volunteers, promote their projects, and connect with other groups in Melbourne’s West. The WestSeed Community Map displays these community groups to encourage **community networking, collaboration** and **mutual support**. To date 119 organisations have engaged with the project and community map.

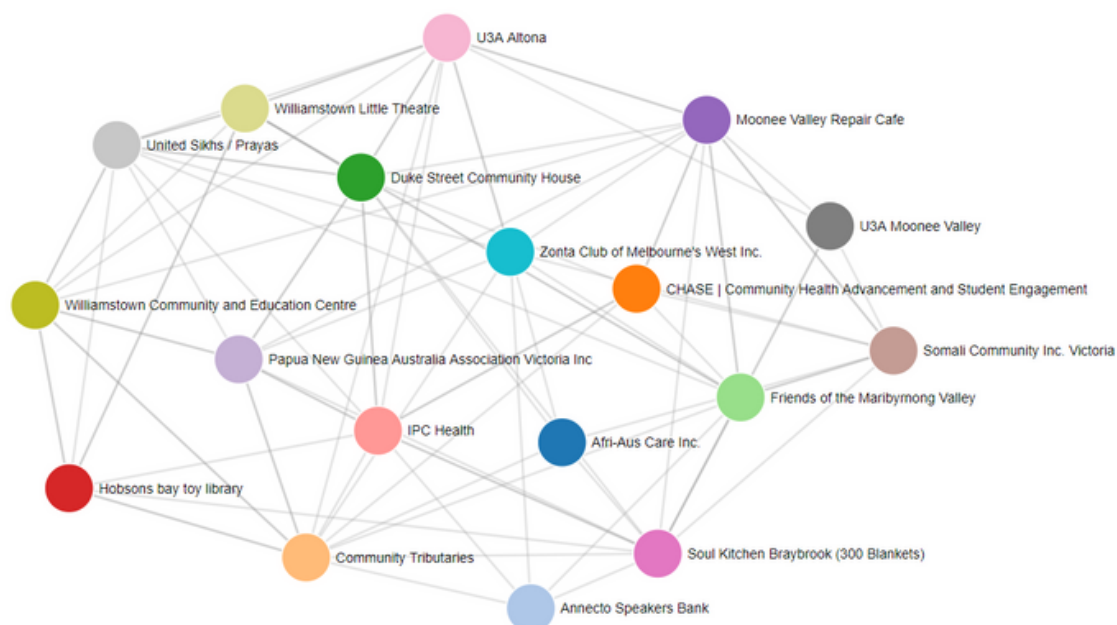


Figure 3. Example of a network map showing connections among WestSeed community organisations

6.7. Upscale volunteering programs and initiatives

For Government

Provide appropriate support and invest in hard and soft infrastructure in Melbourne’s western region to support and grow volunteering to the scale required to deliver government policy outcomes, such as covid-health communications, emergency and crisis response, and anti-racism and social cohesion.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Leverage off Volunteer West’s **WestSeed** community mapping project that has identified and networked multicultural and multifaith organisations across both Brimbank and Melton. This framework could provide an embedded network that is an enduring asset for all levels of government and for the broader community to utilise. The ongoing benefits are clear from such mapping for engaging with and supporting culturally diverse communities during emergencies such as pandemics or other events.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Initiate and participate in communities-of-practice, such as the Volunteer Managers Network, to exchange ideas and share insights and best practices in engaging culturally diverse volunteers. These networks can be channels for synergy while amplifying each practitioner’s work.

6.8. Build capacity and raise the profile of culturally diverse leaders in the volunteering sector

For Government

Local councils to resource and promote leadership training programs among culturally diverse groups.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Increase visible representation of volunteers from culturally diverse groups in organisations to build volunteering confidence and connection with target communities. Appoint multicultural champions as speakers during information session and support them to build leadership experience, for instance, through links with Leadership Victoria. Bring on board culturally diverse volunteers in advisory groups and committees.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Aside from the Volunteer Managers Network run by Volunteer West, an additional opportunity could be to run a leadership community-of-practice that provides a mutually supportive space for culturally diverse volunteer leaders to grow and thrive.

6.9. Acknowledge and support the critical role and impact of volunteer engagement practitioners

For Government

Volunteer coordinators and managers not only carry out recruitment and retention of volunteers. They also provide person-centred support to volunteers by fostering connections, sense of belonging, well-being, and a nurturing environment, which are important in building volunteering confidence and sustaining engagement. These entail time, effort, and skills.

Part of volunteering sector development is to acknowledge and support the critical role of volunteer engagement practitioners. This can be done through flexible funding for capability building and resources required for sustained volunteer engagement.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Advocate and build the evidence for the need to employ and support volunteer engagement practitioners as career professionals.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Document the relationship and community-building activities that form their volunteer engagement roles, particularly in paving the way towards inclusive and culturally safe volunteering.

VoIREACH stand for Volunteering Research, Engagement, Advocacy and Community Hubs.

It aims to provide a viable platform to:

- Deliver more resources to people and communities in the West
- Raise the profile and importance of the volunteering sector
- Advance volunteering practise towards a person-centred, systems-change model for enduring impact, leveraging pioneering best-practise projects
- Innovate data-informed evaluation, research, and policy insights to measure

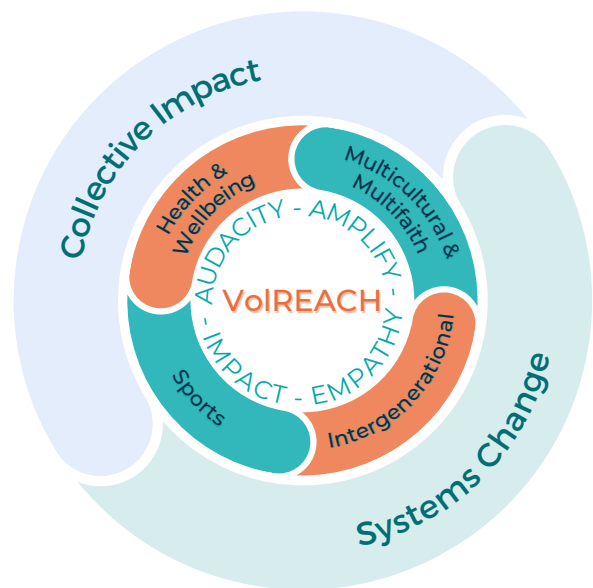


Figure 4: VoIREACH Platform - Four thematic hubs reflecting community strengths and policy priorities, underpinned by values that drive collective impact and systems change.

6.10. Capacity building for sector development

For Government

Regional volunteer resource centres have established connections with local community organisations and are in the best position to foster and convene infrastructure that can create more pathways for volunteers from culturally diverse groups. Volunteer West’s VoIREACH is one innovative platform that requires support from both government and philanthropists through funding and resource sharing.³⁴ Initiatives, such as VoIREACH, build relationships across civil society so that during crisis and emergency, the networks are already there.

For Volunteer resource centres and Community organisations

Collaborate for the establishment of participation-building infrastructures for culturally diverse volunteers and volunteer engagement practitioners. These include community hubs for resource and assets sharing that promote and capitalise on diversity and inclusion.

For Volunteer engagement practitioners

Develop a diversified volunteer engagement toolkit, in collaboration with culturally diverse volunteers, including project advisory or reference groups.

³⁴ <https://www.volunteerwest.org.au/volreach>

Links to Volunteer West's projects

- » WestSeed: <https://www.volunteerwest.org.au/westseed-community-map>
- » PD Pivot: <https://www.volunteerwest.org.au/pd-pivot>
- » Volunteer Managers Network: <https://www.volunteerwest.org.au/organisations>
- » VoIREACH: <https://www.volunteerwest.org.au/volreach>

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