



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

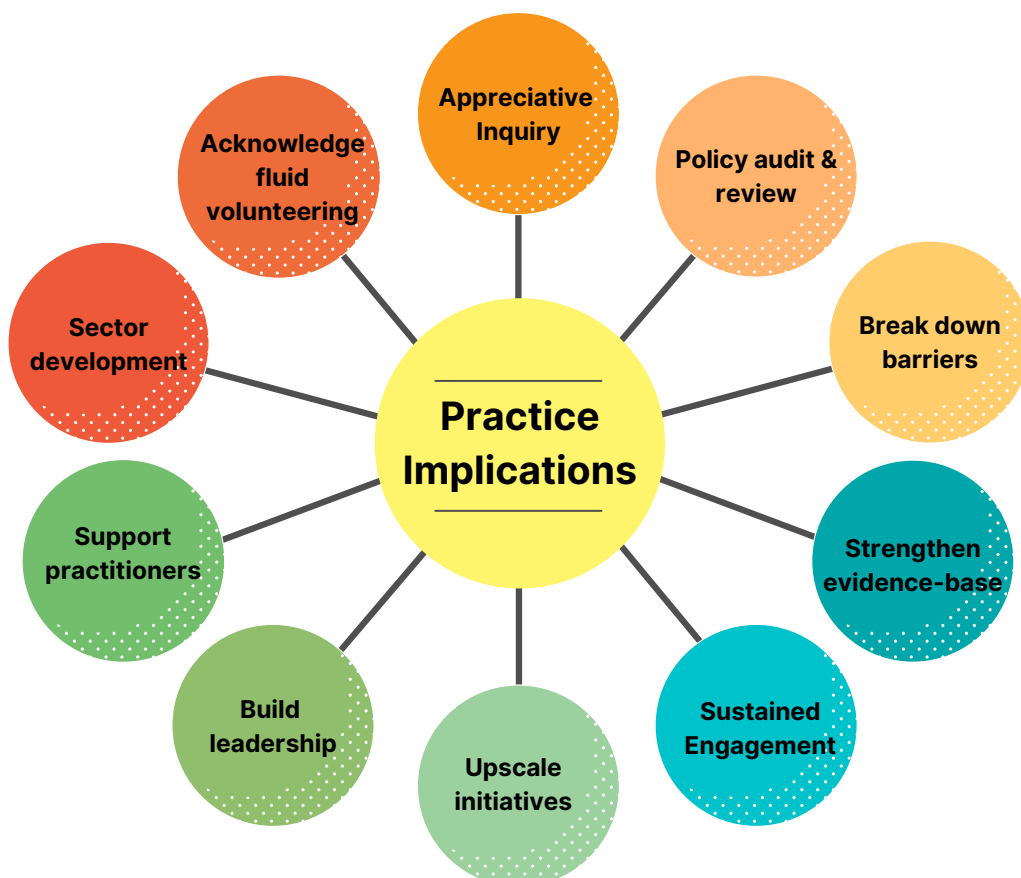
Volunteering in culturally diverse communities

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.