Report

Volunteering, Participatory Action and Social Cohesion

Reimagining volunteering for contemporary Australia

Contents

List of Figures

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Executive summary

Over the past decade, the experience and extent of social cohesion has declined in Australia. The Scanlon Foundation Social Cohesion survey, which has measured social cohesion annually since 2007, has found most recently:

- increased feelings of discrimination
- increased pessimism
- increased fear of terror and crime in the community
- decreased trust in private and public institutions.

This is at a time when communities across Australia continue to face many challenges to social cohesion, including unprecedented bushfires, and as we write, the COVID-19 pandemic which continues. At the same time, although Australia has some of the highest volunteering participation rates in the world, the rates of formal volunteering are declining (36 per cent to 31 per cent between 2010 to 2014 (ABS, 2014a) with an estimated further 40 per cent drop during the COVID-19 pandemic due to restrictions on movement and assembly.

In seeking to understand the contribution that volunteering makes to social cohesion, the Department of Social Services (DSS) commissioned the Centre for Participation and Think Impact to conduct a national research project conducted from June 2018 to August 2020. This work was guided by the National Network of Volunteer Resource Centres (NNVRC) which formed in 2017 to share knowledge and experience from their diverse regions and plan for the future.

This research seeks to explore and inform four key questions:

1. To what extent does our current national volunteering infrastructure contribute to a more cohesive society?
2. Is our current understanding of 'volunteering' appropriate to the contemporary context?
3. What models of engaging the populace in voluntary activity will best lead to improved social cohesion?
4. How can we transition the current national volunteering infrastructure to best deliver social cohesion?

This report outlines how the current national volunteer support infrastructure can transition to better contribute to all dimensions of social cohesion.

Models of social cohesion and voluntary participation for today

Following a review of social cohesion models used globally, followed by extensive local consultation, the following model of social cohesion was adopted to guide the exploration of the research questions. It owes much to the well-regarded Bertelsmann Stiftung domains of social cohesion.

Access
People have access to places and infrastructure where they can be mutually supportive

Connection
People feel strongly connected to their community and participate in it

Fairness
People feel that opportunities to participate are fairly distributed

Social networks
People have strong, resilient social and support networks

Trust in others
People have a high level of trust in others

Acceptance of diversity
People accept individuals with other values and lifestyles as equals

Social participation

Social relations

Social cohesion

Focus on the common good

Domains of social cohesion and their dimensions for the Australian context

Solidarity and helpfulness
People feel a responsibility for others and are willing to help them

Civic participation
People are enabled to have a voice in public discussions

Respect for social rules
People abide by the fundamental rules of society

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Figure 1: The adopted model of social cohesion domains and dimensions for the contemporary Australian context

Volunteering makes a significant contribution to society (valued at between $43 and $200 billion to annual GDP (Mitchell, 2016)). However the focus on formal volunteering activity that seeks to engage, train and match people to volunteer roles has led to a dynamic of seeing volunteers as a 'free resource' to 'get a job done', rather than seeing the full value and potential of individuals participating in their communities in many ways.

> *For many people who volunteer, they do not consider themselves volunteers, and in many other languages and cultures there is not even a word for it.*

There is also growing recognition that the numbers do not reflect the informal voluntary activity that occurs within communities, particularly within culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. For many people who volunteer, they do not consider themselves volunteers, and in many other languages and cultures there is not even a word for it.

The majority of volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) report difficulties recruiting suitable volunteers, and at the same time, people are being turned away from opportunities because they lack the flexibility, skills and experience to perform prescribed volunteer roles. Inadvertently, parts of the formal volunteering sector are creating barriers for the very people that could most benefit from the opportunity.

> *Does 'helping' or 'giving back' reinforce power inequity and place volunteering in the hands of those with privilege?*

Understanding the history of volunteering in Australia is important. Volunteering as we know it stems from a predominantly Anglo-Celtic perspective with customs of largely white, middle-class people 'giving back' and 'helping those in need'. This lens raises some challenging questions. Does volunteering provide equal opportunity for all people to participate and therefore contribute to social cohesion? Or does volunteering sometimes contribute to the very structural problems it seeks to solve? Does 'helping' or 'giving back' reinforce power inequity and place volunteering in the hands of those with privilege?

… there can be no doubt that lives can be enhanced for both 'volunteers' and those 'volunteered to'.

These are challenging questions because volunteering is also a selfless act. People give their time and talent in profoundly important ways and there can be no doubt that lives can be enhanced for both 'volunteers' and those 'volunteered to'.

This research has identified great potential for the volunteer sector to transition, and through this transition, contribute more to strengthening social cohesion. To strengthen social cohesion, the volunteering sector needs to be enabled and funded to **take a broader perspective of 'volunteering'.** This perspective is referred to in this report as '**participatory action**'. While it may seem semantic, the language we use, and lens through which we look, both appear to be making a pronounced difference to the degree to which volunteering contributes to social cohesion.

Formal volunteering makes a vital and substantial contribution to Australian society. However, in its current form it also has inherent barriers for many to engage in voluntary activity. Interestingly, we have seen an estimated 40 per cent drop in formal volunteering during COVID-19 which has been replaced to some degree by a whole range of informal expressions of mutual support.

Social cohesion can best be impacted by a concerted effort to build all the participatory action dimensions.

This study has identified a way to view formal and informal volunteering as aspects or 'dimensions' of a broader mosaic of participatory action. Social cohesion can best be impacted by a concerted effort to build all of the participatory action dimensions. The following figure illustrates the five core dimensions of participatory action that can best contribute to social cohesion.

Acting in mutual support
Individuals can contribute to social cohesion by acting in support of each other in ways that don't fall into the concept of volunteerism. Examples might include acting for a stranger in need, supporting an acquaintance to navigate an administrative task, bringing in a neighbour's rubbish bin or providing career guidance to a friend.

Informal volunteering
Individuals can contribute to social cohesion by giving their time willingly outside an organisational setting. Examples might include regularly caring for a friend's child, participating in a street clean up activity or tending to a community garden.

Getting involved
Simply getting involved in group activities contributes to social cohesion. Whether it's attending a book club, playing a team sport, playing music with others or speaking out on a social issue, this dimension plays a key role in bringing communities together.

Social innovation capacity

Formal volunteering
The current focus of most volunteer support activity, this encompasses time willingly given for the common good, without financial gain and taking place in an organisational setting. Examples include formally acknowledged volunteer roles with organisations like Red Cross, Landcare, or a community sporting club.

Less structured · More structured · Participation-oriented · Volunteer-oriented

Figure 2: Participatory action dimensions

The potential for participatory action to contribute to social cohesion

To help envisage the potential for social cohesion through the adoption and support of this broader concept of *participatory action*, a series of illustrations have been developed for each of the social cohesion domains and dimensions.

Social participation

As illustrated, adoption and support of participatory action has great potential to contribute to the dimensions of *access* and *fairness* within the social participation domain.

Access
People have access to places and infrastructure where they can be mutually supportive

Connection
People feel strongly connected to their community and participate in it

Fairness
People feel that opportunities to participate are fairly distributed

Figure 3: illustrations of the potential for participatory action to contribute to social participation domain

A selection of key activities to unlock this potential include:

- Providing access to community-owned infrastructure where informal volunteering and participation can take place. In many regions, places we once regarded as community centres have, according to many community leaders, 'become a space to rent not a place to build communities'. This dimension acknowledges the potential for the volunteering sector to contribute to social cohesion by providing and facilitating access to physical or virtual spaces and resources for use by the community to meet and build connections and mutual support. During COVID-19, access to community-owned assets and resources by community is critical for enabling activities to pivot in support of communities during lockdown. In many instances, organisations were forced to stop all activities because they could not access their buildings or infrastructure.

- Support community determined activities for communities to have agency over the activities and where underrepresented communities have a place where they 'belong'.

- Take a broader approach to volunteering that considers all types of participatory actions.

- Facilitate the right support to overcome barriers to participation. This might include transport solutions that are needed to facilitate engagement in community activities or services (RACGP, 2019).

- Ensure no disadvantage – actions must have a strong equity focus (RACGP, 2019).

- Mindset shift – not seeing volunteers as a resource but seeing the individual and facilitating connections across all forms of difference (such as age, culture, experience, diversity).

- Provide help with service and system navigation and access (RACGP, 2019).

Social relations

As illustrated, there is potential across all three dimensions of the **social relations** domain for participation to build social networks, greater trust and acceptance of diversity. One such opportunity is through social prescribing which seeks to better integrate the healthcare system with community activities and services.

Social networks
People have strong, resilient social and support networks

Trust in others
People have a high level of trust in others

Acceptance of diversity
People accept individuals with other values and lifestyles as equals
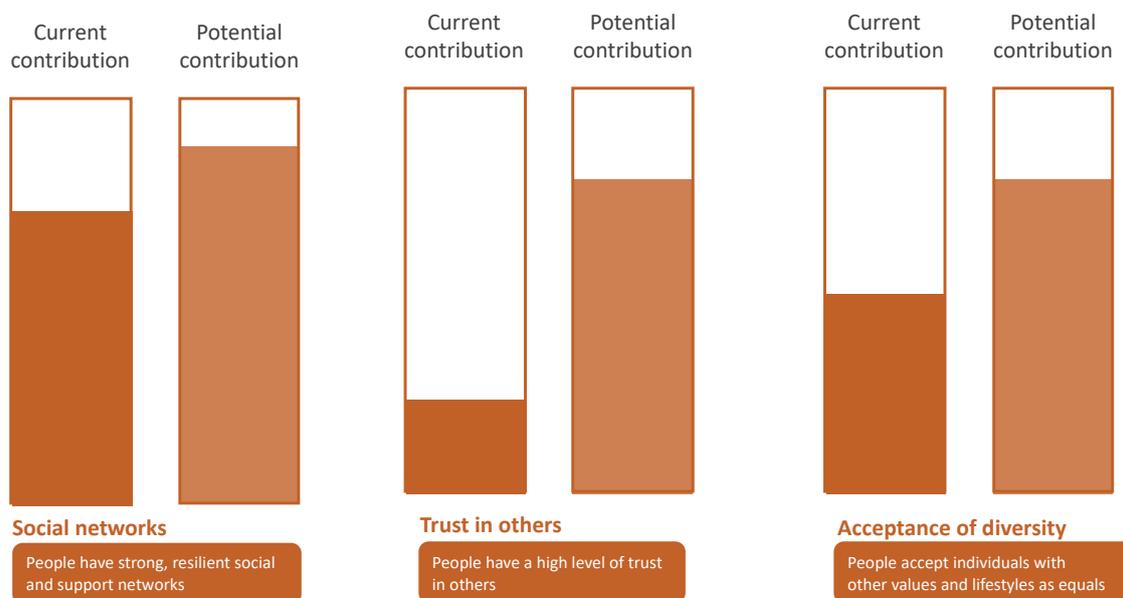
Figure 4: illustrations of the potential for participatory action to contribute to social relations domain

A selection of key activities to unlock this potential include:

- Need to start early – volunteer sector enabled to do more in schools.
- Contribute to the social prescribing infrastructure - focusing on finding 'the right activities' to meet the needs of potential participants.
- Work with VIOs to ensure they have the right skills to work with individuals to design appropriate and meaningful activities.
- Outreach activities to engage people who are vulnerable or isolated in participation opportunities.

Focus on common good

As illustrated, the access and fairness dimensions of the social participation domain can be improved.

| Current contribution | Potential contribution | | Current contribution | Potential contribution | | Current contribution | Potential contribution |

Solidarity and helpfulness

People feel a responsibility for others and are willing to help them

Civic participation

People are enabled to have a voice in public discussions

Respect for social rules
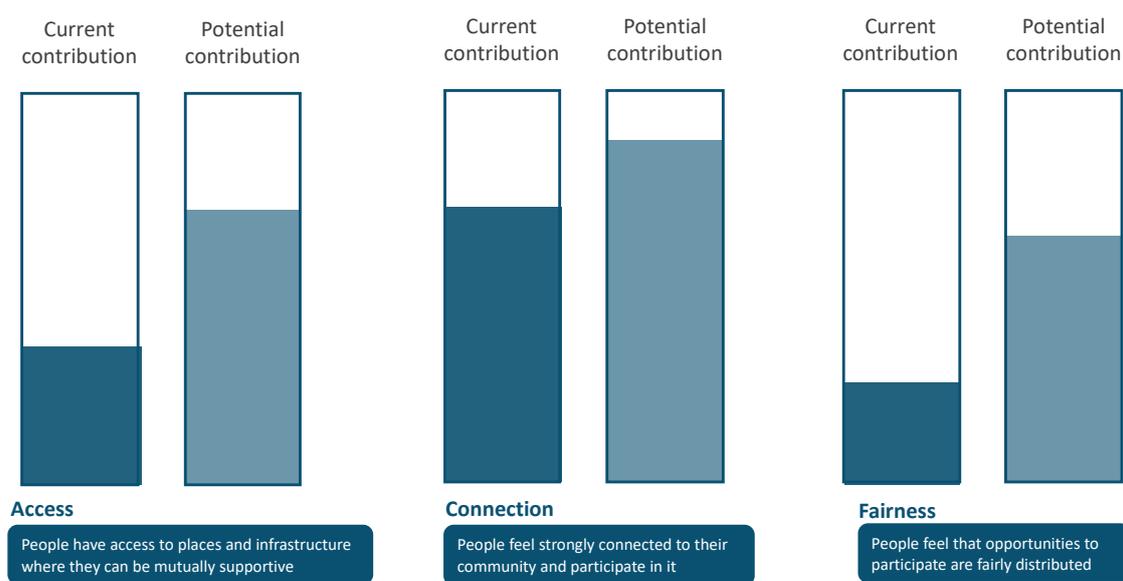
People abide by the fundamental rules of society

Figure 5: illustrations of the potential for participatory action to contribute to the common good domain

A selection of key activities to unlock this potential include:

- Work with schools to promote participation and active citizenship. One might ask, who is the voice of mutual care and helpfulness in our community today?
- Provision of community infrastructure and resources to ensure all people have a voice.
- Support community determined activities for communities to have agency over the activities and where underrepresented communities have a place where they 'belong'.

Principles to guide volunteer support sector evolution

Through this research the NNVRC seek to support the volunteer sector to transition to a model that can better contribute to social cohesion, and in doing so, contribute more broadly to the Australian Government policy goals. The following **seven principles** have been developed to guide this work.

Principle 1: Broad participation is essential to social and economic recovery from COVID-19 and other major shocks

This year began with unprecedented bushfires, closely followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences have demonstrated three aspects of humanity – the *willingness of communities to participate in emergency response activities,* the *debilitating impact of social isolation* and the *resilience of communities when they find ways to participate* in activities in support of each other. These lessons cannot be forgotten – it is not just the efforts of a dedicated band of formal volunteers that is leading bushfire and COVID-19 recovery – it is a whole-of-community willingness to contribute to social and economic recovery. Given the expectation of increased frequency and severity of climate change shocks and the systemic vulnerability associated with inequity and isolation, strong, positive whole-of-community participation will be critical to the preparedness, response and recovery from future events.

Principle 2: Social cohesion is a valuable policy goal

Beyond COVID-19 recovery, social cohesion must be acknowledged as a valuable ongoing federal policy goal. Social cohesion contributes to a more inclusive economy – one where all people can positively contribute. The more people that are excluded from participating in the economy, the higher the costs of providing a social safety net.

As Australia continues to embrace multiculturalism, social cohesion is critical to the appreciation of cultural diversity. The acceptance of different lifestyles and cultures can become a national strength.

Resilience to disasters, emergencies and disruption is also positively impacted by social cohesion in the form of a willingness and ability to participate in actions to prepare communities, mitigate immediate impacts and assist in recovery.

Reconciliation with First Nations peoples is also a federal policy goal and First Nations peoples provide valuable perspectives on participation; where supporting family and community is interwoven with kinship responsibilities and is a fundamental part of self-fulfilment, in stark contrast to an individualised Western understanding of 'helping' by volunteering.

Principle 3: Social cohesion needs meaningful investment

Strong social cohesion does not happen spontaneously. It can be nurtured, fostered and enabled by deliberate effort and the provision of accessible participation-building infrastructure. And the provision of participation-building infrastructure (for example, community-owned and controlled physical assets and facilities, relationships, skills, tools and resources) requires meaningful investment, to create long-term economic and social returns. At present, the federal Government provides $18.8 million over three years to the volunteer sector under the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA). This is an average investment of approximately 25 cents per person per year in Australia. Strengthening social cohesion through participation will produce social value in communities that will drive economic savings for all levels of Government with the right support.

To understand the relative magnitude of investment, within the health system it costs on average **$634 per Emergency Department** (ED) presentation and **$5,390 per person per hospital stay** in Australia (IHPA, 2014). In the justice system it costs **$117,000** to keep someone in prison per year in Australia (based on 2015 figures). The benefits of investing in regional participation infrastructure will enable local place-based community participation that will produce direct social and economic benefits.

These benefits could be in the form of reduced welfare through social enterprise development and job creation, greater employability through improved confidence and work skills, improved emotional and mental health and reduced isolation reducing the need for health services and avoided contacts with the justice system by providing outreach and opportunities to meaningfully participate and belong. However, building participation requires meaningful investment to achieve social cohesion benefits.

Principle 4: Invest with 'bounded flexibility'

Funding under a volunteering lens is frequently tied to a set of specified activities. This severely limits responsiveness to local community needs. Support for participation-building infrastructure under the principle of *bounded flexibility* will benefit from the ability to be flexible and responsive to local needs within broad social cohesion goals.

Principle 5: Social cohesion requires working in partnership

Participation building infrastructure can never be 'owned' or managed by one entity. Local government facilities, parks and gardens, Neighbourhood Houses, retail, community centres, private homes and social enterprise hubs are all examples of places where social participation activities can take place. It is vital that they are 'hyper-local' – where the people are. This will require new levels of communication, partnership-building, respect and commitment to action by many stakeholders.

Principle 6: Volunteer support sector must embrace the opportunity to evolve

Volunteering is a laudable and essential activity. Yet the way it is viewed, supported and funded must evolve in keeping with the contemporary needs of Australian society. Those who work in and for the volunteer support sector must recognise that volunteer support, in its current form, is limited in its

ability to deliver social cohesion. This presents an opportunity to evolve into a participation support sector which can be embraced.

Principle 7: Success is determined by impact not activity measures

To determine the success of participation initiatives, performance must be measured by impact. The success of the support sector should be determined by the impact it has on building community-wide social cohesion.

Recommendations for transitioning the sector to strengthen social cohesion

Three groups of recommendations comprising **eight recommendations** have been developed to transition the sector to strengthen social cohesion.

Broaden the remit of the volunteer support sector to better build social cohesion	Provide a strategic framework to support sector transition	Ensure appropriate resourcing to support transition

Figure 6: A structure for recommendations towards social cohesion

Broadening the remit of the volunteer support sector to better build social cohesion

Recommendation 1: Expand the emphasis, language, and basic orientation of the volunteering support sector from 'volunteering' to 'participation'

The opportunity to build social cohesion will come from the **expansion of the notion of volunteering** – to see it and support it as part of a broader continuum of participatory action; one more in line with contemporary Australian society and the principles of asset-based community development (ABCD).

Volunteering is essential to the very fabric of society. Yet, the support for volunteering in its current form is highly transactional in nature and based in historical ideals. Therefore, it is limited in the degree to which it can transform communities and build social cohesion. Many communities and cultures act in mutual support without ever thinking of it as volunteering. Many vulnerable groups experience barriers to volunteering. And the act of engaging volunteers (those with the privilege and skills) to 'volunteer to' vulnerable groups can have the unintended effect of reinforcing inequity of opportunity and power and is therefore limited in its ability to build social cohesion.

Recommendation 2: Acknowledge Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs) are in the best position to foster the development of participation-building infrastructure in support of social cohesion

Volunteer Resource Centres are in the best position to evolve into organisations that can deliver services in support of the broader continuum of participatory action. They have deep community connections and a strong understanding of local needs. However, participatory action requires participation-building infrastructure that includes people, physical assets, facilities, skills, tools and resources. Evolution of these organisations and the expansion of their remits and resourcing is the best way to improve participation-building infrastructure.

Participating-building infrastructure includes physical facilities, people to run them, skills, relationships and also digital and online facilities. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, we need to be cautious about an over-reliance on online resources. They play a part but cannot replace human contact.

A strategic framework to support sector transition

Recommendation 3: Co-design and implement a National Participation Strategy

To ensure a united and impactful community participation effort to build social cohesion, a **National Participation Strategy** needs to be co-designed and implemented to guide the development of participation-building infrastructure. This strategy will be best served with a strong commitment to co-design which encompasses community organisations, community members, relevant government departments and others. The strategy should guide and inform the evolution of the volunteer support sector and expand its focus to include participation-building and social cohesion.

Recommendation 4: Develop and implement *Regional Participation Plans*

To ensure social cohesion is supported across all communities in Australia, there is a need to localise the National Participation Strategy. To enable this, it is recommended that **Regional Participation Plans** are developed and implemented. This will enable local communities to participate and respond to the National Participation Strategy within their local contexts to address their community needs. It is recommended that the responsibility for developing and implementing these Regional Participation Plans sits with Regional Participation Resource Centres as key facilitators and enablers of regional participation activities (see Recommendation 5).

Recommendation 5: Evolve VRCs into *Regional Participation Resource Centres* (RPRCs) and establish new RPRCs where none exist

It is recommended that VRCs evolve into **community-owned and managed** Regional Participation Resource Centres (RPRCs) that represent the needs of communities across Australia. This evolution must recognise the special focus required in peri-urban, regional, rural and remote communities where there is a lack of participation infrastructure.

As resource centres, RPRCs will play an essential role in linking up, co-ordinating and bringing together regional activities in support of participation and fostering and providing resources to existing and new community-led initiatives. They will play a role in applying the principles of asset-based community development and unlocking latent social capital (community assets and capabilities) in support of stronger communities. The value of localised and place-based community participation capability and capacity cannot be underestimated. For example, the Royal Australian College of GPs in partnership with the Consumers Health Forum of Australia has recommended incorporating social prescribing into health system planning and service delivery to deliver better healthcare and stronger communities (RACGP, 2019). As such, stronger communities that can support themselves contribute to a stronger Australian economy.

Recommendation 6: Develop an action research and ongoing evaluation program to inform practise, innovation and policy

To support the sector transition, investment and support for ongoing action research and a shared **National Participation Outcomes Framework** to evaluate and guide learning in the sector will be essential. Social cohesion cannot be measured by the number of people participating, and the value of this time invested alone. It must be measured by the social change and value experienced within communities. Ensure the action research is responsive to identified practise and policy needs and facilitates collaborative impact-focused research across government, industry, community and academia – to enable continuous evolution. A shared national outcomes framework and support for the sector to strengthen their evaluation capacity and capability, connect and learn from other regions will also be critical.

Appropriate resourcing to support transition

Recommendation 7: Provide three years of transition funding to support sector transition and its evaluation

To enable the volunteer sector to contribute more fully to social cohesion, meaningful transition funding is required. The existing volunteer sector requires investment to develop workforce leadership, capacity and skills to design new approaches to address a broader remit from volunteering to participation. This transition funding should also include the establishment of new RPRCs in areas where there is no representation, drawing upon existing community assets and strengths.

It also needs to be acknowledged that the existing VMA funding model, where Volunteer State based peaks are funded as VRCs has created a dynamic that finds the peaks competing with other VRCs. To unite, strengthen and transition the sector, the transition funding needs to support the capacity for collaborative impact, where the sector is enabled to work together and across other sectors, united by the National Participation Strategy.

Essential to the success of this transition is funding for an impact evaluation that will enable the sector to learn and evolve together.

Recommendation 8: Provide a commitment to long-term core funding

To enable RPRCs to meaningfully contribute in an ongoing way to social cohesion, certainty of long-term core funding is required. It is envisaged that during the transition period, RPRCs will begin to support their growth with the development of diversified funding. The core funding investment should recognise the scale of the opportunity here and go well beyond the 25 cents per person per year currently provided through the Volunteer Management Activity (that is, $18.8 million over three years for all Australia).

Providing core funding should contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of RPRCs and enable the development of stronger leadership and governance capacity of organisations. This will enable them to evolve their approaches and ensure the participation support sector attracts and retains a high-calibre, entrepreneurial and skilled workforce. This workforce should have capacity and resources to build strong community engagement and contribute to partnerships and networks across all sectors.

A strengthened sector would have the skills and resources to leverage the core funding to evolve their own diversified funding models, attracting investments from various sectors to contribute to the sustainability of their effort to strengthen social cohesion.

Certainty of core funding will also enable the RPRCs to build community readiness to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters and emergencies.

Glossary

The following acronyms are used in this report:

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CIRCA	Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
DSS	Department of Social Services
GSS	General Social Survey
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NNVRC	National Network of Volunteer Resource Centres
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRI	Policy Research Initiative
VA	Volunteering Australia
VIO	Volunteer Involving Organisation
VMA	Volunteer Management Activity
VRC	Volunteer Resource Centre
VSNs	Volunteering Support Networks
VSO	Volunteer Support Organisations
VSS	Volunteer Support Services
WfD	Work for the Dole

1. Introduction

1.1   The purpose of this report

The Centre for Participation and Think Impact have been commissioned by the Department of Social Services (DSS) to lead a national research project to explore the general question: *How does volunteer engagement impact social cohesion?* This research forms part of the DSS *Strong and Resilient Communities Activity*.

This research project addresses this question and critically reflects on the effectiveness of current volunteer engagement practices as an instrument to build social cohesion. It was determined early in the project that any superficial approach to answering this question would fall short. To meaningfully interrogate the impact of volunteer engagement on social cohesion, we needed to deeply understand what is meant by *social cohesion*, and indeed, what is meant by *volunteer engagement* in the current Australian context. This study is therefore undertaken as a systemic review of many of the underlying dynamics that characterise both volunteering and social cohesion in Australia today.

This report presents the findings relating to the relationship between volunteer engagement and social cohesion in our communities. In other words, it looks at how we can **build social cohesion through voluntary participation.**

> ## *During this study, Australia has faced numerous new challenges to social cohesion*

During this study, Australia has faced numerous new challenges to social cohesion. These include global challenges like the rise of divisive political rhetoric, ongoing migration, people seeking asylum, and people seeking refuge from conflict. Then of course, we are experiencing the ongoing social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Locally, we are contending with the severe and increasing impacts of drought, bushfires, and other climate-related effects as well as loss of trust in institutions. The most recent surveys of the annual Monash Scanlon Social Cohesion index have recorded significant falls in the 'belonging' and 'worth' domains.

Meanwhile concern over the environment and climate change has recorded the largest annual increase since the surveys began (from 10 per cent to 19 per cent).

So, this report seeks to answer, or at least inform, some critical questions facing Australia in the coming decades:

1. To what extent does our current national volunteering infrastructure contribute to a more cohesive society?

2. Is our current understanding of 'volunteering' appropriate to the contemporary context?

3. What models of engaging the populace in voluntary activity will best lead to improved social cohesion?

4. How can we transition the current national volunteering infrastructure to best deliver social cohesion?

The report is the culmination of a range of activities that took place between June 2018 and August 2020. The research employed a mixed-method approach, including literature review, in-depth interviews, field research, co-design workshops and comparative analysis.

1.2   About the NNVRC

This study has been supported by the National Network of Volunteer Resource Centres (NNVRC) which was formally established in 2017 including nine Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs) (now eleven). The purpose of the NNVRC is to be a strong national network, working together to strengthen community resilience by building the capacity and sustainability of small to medium Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs).

In order to do this, localised VRCs needed to challenge their current thinking and *modus operandi* to enable them to be inclusive, respectful and responsive to their communities. Furthermore, they needed to be committed to redefining and promoting core services to be delivered by VRCs, building capacity of VRCs through professional development and fostering and cultivating active collaboration and continuous improvement.

Membership of the NNVRC is open to any Volunteer Resource Centre committed to building community capacity and resilience through the provision and promotion of information, support, services and mentoring to individuals, organisations and communities about all aspects of volunteering. They achieve this by being inclusive, respectful and responsive to their communities.

Membership currently comprises the following eleven organisations:

- Albury Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau Inc., NSW/VIC
- Bendigo Volunteer Resource Centre Inc., Bendigo, VIC
- Centre for Participation Inc., Wimmera, VIC
- Hunter Volunteer Centre Inc., Hunter Valley, NSW
- Northern Rivers Community Gateway, NSW
- Northern Volunteering Inc., North Adelaide, SA
- Southern Volunteering Inc., SA
- The Centre for Continuing Education Inc., Wangaratta, VIC
- Volunteers Far North Queensland Inc., Cairns QLD
- Volunteer West Inc, Western Melbourne, VIC
- Whittlesea Community Connections Inc., Whittlesea, VIC

Five NNVRC members agreed to act as case studies to explore the issues raised in this study. These are outlined in Table 1.

Each of these locations was chosen for their diversity of context and for their high levels of population or special needs groups. All five organisations are committed to evolving volunteer engagement practice through their participation in the NNVRC. They broadly represent metro, regional and rural contexts, have high unemployment rates, are located in growth corridors including new migrant populations, and have organisations in the region that are each committed to evolving volunteer engagement practice.

Table 1: Case study sites

Location	Project focus	Theme
Albury-Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau, NSW/VIC	The evolution of *Cards and Coffee* program	Contributing to social cohesion through **deeper engagement with refugees**
Centre for Participation, Wimmera, VIC	Building capacity of community organisations	Contributing to social cohesion through **strong community organisations**
Hunter Volunteer Centre, Hunter Valley, NSW	Mutual obligations and volunteering as a pathway to employment	Contributing to social cohesion through **support to employment**
Northern Volunteering, North Adelaide, SA	Developing a youth inclusion framework for the volunteer sector	Contributing to social cohesion through **greater youth engagement**
Whittlesea Community Connections, Whittlesea, VIC	Community-led approach to developing a Neighbourhood House	Contributing to social cohesion through the **asset-based community development**

Figure 7: Case study sites

1.3 A systemic review of volunteer engagement and social cohesion

While there is no doubt that the promotion and support of volunteering makes an essential contribution to Australian communities, little is known about how current approaches to the practice of volunteer engagement fosters social cohesion.

Likewise, there has been little research to date into the non-financial contribution – that is, the social and environmental impact – of volunteering in our communities, as well as the other kinds of value created in the undertaking of voluntary activity.

The 'value' of volunteering is often viewed through a replacement cost lens

We know that volunteering forms an essential component of a civil, harmonious and healthy society, yet our current ways of understanding the value created by the volunteer sector have focused primarily on input data (for example, number of volunteers, number of hours volunteered) to generate financial proxies as the measure of value. The 'value' of volunteering is often viewed through a 'replacement cost' lens. That is, the cost of providing those hours of volunteer activity if they were provided by a paid workforce.

This research project addresses this critical gap **by identifying the potential for voluntary activity to contribute to social cohesion in communities across the country**, as well as how the volunteer sector itself can make adjustments to more explicitly support this outcome. In other words, it asks 'how can we structure and support volunteering to build healthy, resilient and cohesive communities?'

For volunteer engagement to be successful for people and communities in Australia, we need to develop a better understanding of what constitutes effective volunteer engagement and participation (in both formal and informal settings) and its contribution to social cohesion. This contribution needs to be considered from two perspectives:

- To what extent does the direct engagement of volunteers from target demographic groups contribute to their experience of social cohesion and that of the broader community? In other words, how does the experience of being a volunteer contribute to positive social outcomes?
- To what extent does designed activity to support effective volunteer engagement create outcomes that contribute to social cohesion? How can we build social cohesion indicators and outcomes into broader volunteer engagement practices?

Over the course of this project, our understanding and definition of volunteer engagement has evolved and moved beyond dominant ideas of volunteer engagement as a formalised, organisational strategy applicable in formal or traditional volunteer settings. We are utilising the term to articulate the myriad ways that people are activated to participate in volunteer activity in the broadest sense. By doing so, we are seeking to recognise and gain further insight into the formal and informal ways that people participate in their communities.

> 'Volunteer engagement is one way into community engagement and inclusion, and one way out of disadvantage' – VRC representative

2. What do we mean by social cohesion?

2.1 A brief history of social cohesion

Social cohesion is a critical concept in a country of many millions and a world of many billions. It is not merely an academic concept but a very real lens through which we can understand the way communities of all sizes and types operate, and the factors that determine the wellbeing and experiences of those who live within them. Social cohesion is a concept with a history.

Jane Jensen's 2010 work for the Commonwealth Secretariat United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, *Defining and Measuring Social Cohesion* provides a valuable insight into the development of the concept of social cohesion and reminds us that 'social cohesion is a property of a society. It is not an individual characteristic. Social cohesion is something to be encouraged, fostered and protected'.

Social inclusion is an end product. It results from policy that incorporates social development. Conversely, social cohesion can be eroded by policy that pays insufficient attention to social rights or economic inclusion.

> *Does the very idea of having volunteers (overrepresented by Australia's middle classes) 'giving their time' to 'vulnerable groups', reinforce the underlying foundations of privilege and power inequity?*

Let's take a moment to think deeply about Australian policy relating to volunteer engagement. What underlying values, beliefs, orientations underly this policy? Why do we have such a focus on 'formal volunteering'? Does the very idea of having volunteers (overrepresented by Australia's middle classes) 'giving their time' to 'vulnerable groups', reinforce the underlying foundations of privilege and power inequity? Why do many cultures not even have a word for volunteering? Is our current concept of volunteering contributing as much as it could to social cohesion?

Following the *trente glorieuses*, the thirty years of economic growth following the end of the Second World War (1945–1975), social policy was widely rethought, especially among UN member nations, and was recognised as a key underpinning of economic performance. The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development defined social policy as 'public policies and institutions that aim to protect citizens from social contingencies and poverty, and ultimately to enable them to strive for their own life goals'.

In 1980 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) began diffusing a claim among its members and within policy communities that 'social policy in many countries creates obstacles to growth' (quoted in Deacon et al., 1997: 71)

> *In the early 1990s … warnings appeared of the need to balance attention to economic restructuring with caution about social cohesion in order to sustain that restructuring*

In the early 1990s, serious concerns about stability and the limits of structural adjustment based solely on a free-market economy arose both in the OECD countries and elsewhere. Social cohesion again became a key word in policy discussions and warnings appeared of the need to balance attention to economic restructuring with caution about social cohesion in order to sustain that restructuring. (Jensen, 2010)

2.2   Towards a framework to define social cohesion

Social cohesion as social and economic inclusion

In 2001 the Council of Europe launched what has become one of the most important efforts to use the concept of social cohesion to organise its work on social development. This work recognised social cohesion as a concept that includes 'values and principles which aim to ensure that all citizens have access (inclusion) to fundamental social and economic rights without discrimination and on an equal footing. Social cohesion is a flagship concept which constantly reminds us of the need to be collectively attentive (to social inclusion) and any kind of discrimination, inequality, marginality or exclusion'.

> *... to ensure that all citizens have access to fundamental social and economic rights without discrimination and on an equal footing*

While this concept is important for this work it has an inherent limitation in that 'inclusion' (or conversely, exclusion) is a condition experienced by individuals rather than a feature or characteristic of a community. Of course, the number or proportion of people experiencing exclusion of various types is certainly one way of appreciating the nature of cohesion in any given community or society as a whole.

Social cohesion as social integration

As migration continued to grow into the early twenty-first century, greater attention was paid to ethnic, cultural and religious diversity as challenges to social stability. From here, social cohesion began to be viewed as an issue of 'integration'. Social cohesion was seen as the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimise disparities and avoid polarisation. From there the language of a 'mutually supportive community' began to proliferate in the literature and global social policy. It also became increasingly acknowledged that no society can be fully cohesive. Social cohesion is seen as an ideal for which to strive rather than a fully achievable goal and each generation has to find a manageable equilibrium.

> *The idea of a 'mutually supportive community' is critical to understanding both social cohesion and volunteering.*

The idea of a 'mutually supportive community' is critical to understanding both social cohesion and volunteering. Volunteering is in many ways the embodiment of a supportive community. But what of the concept of mutuality? To what extend does our current approach to volunteering transfer power, decision-making, self-determination and resources? To what extent does our current approach to volunteering contribute to integration and resilience through diversity? To what extent does our current approach to volunteering contribute to addressing the underlying causes of exclusion and poverty?

Social cohesion as social capital

Social cohesion is not only a matter of combating exclusion and poverty. It is also about creating solidarity in society so as to minimise the conditions that lead to exclusion. At the same time, in so far as poverty and exclusion continue to exist, there is also a need to take specific measures to help vulnerable members of society. A social cohesion strategy must therefore tackle exclusion by means of both prevention and cure.

The Government of Canada's concerns about social cohesion morphed into close attention to social capital and a major research initiative, *The Policy Research Initiative* (PRI), which was launched in 2003. In 2005 the PRI reported; 'Family, friends, and acquaintances frequently constitute an important asset essential to the well-being of Canadians. When one is seeking support to make it through hard times, searching for a new job opportunity, or simply living a full and active life, it pays to know people. This is

the simple idea behind the concept of social capital. A wide range of research illustrates the ways in which the availability and use of various social ties may make a difference to individual well-being'.

> *'[Governments can redesign] the public realm to encourage everyday interaction, supporting grassroots community associations, asking people to get involved, and supporting them when they do.'*

In their 2006 publication, *Sticking Together: Social Capital and Local Government* Halima Khan and Rick Muir observed 'There is now an impressive body of research that testifies to the importance of active communities and a strong civil society for individual and communal well-being. In particular, it seems clear that social capital has an important contribution to make towards tackling poverty and disadvantage. Communities with strong networks, high levels of trust and well-established habits of co-operation and association are generally much better off than those without these things … Of course, government cannot simply invent social capital any more than it can invent money or employment … But that does not mean that government cannot do anything to strengthen civic culture … for instance, redesigning the public realm to encourage everyday interaction, supporting grassroots community associations, asking people to get involved, and supporting them when they do.'

The concept of social capital is closely aligned with the notion of 'natural supports' – the extent to which individuals have close bonds with relations, friends and acquaintances. This is why social capital is associated with lower morbidity and increased life expectancy (Kawachi et al. 1997).

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated how the loss of capacity in formal volunteering has to some degree been replaced by community members stepping up to participate voluntarily. In fact, Volunteering Australia report a drop in formal volunteering of up to 40 per cent in the wake of the pandemic, and this need has been replaced to varying degrees by spontaneous actions of mutual support.

2.3   The nexus between volunteer engagement and social cohesion

Volunteer Engagement

To what extent does our current national volunteering infrastructure contribute to a more cohesive society?

What are the dimensions of social cohesion to help guide the future of Australia's volunteering infrastructure and management activity?

Social Cohesion

Figure 8: Exploring the nexus of volunteer engagement and social cohesion

To be able to understand the nexus between volunteer engagement and social cohesion the research needed to establish a definition and framework for social cohesion that resonated with the volunteer sector and provide a useful structure to understand this nexus. To achieve this, the researchers looked deeply into a range of national and international models which were then tested and refined through stakeholder engagement.

In their work *Conceptualising social cohesion – social cohesion in Australia,* Markus and Kirptchenko (2007) argue that definitions of social cohesion build on intangible factors, such as *sense of belonging, common values, willingness to participate and share outcomes*. These intangibles contribute to diversity of understanding the very nature of social cohesion.

The OECD describes cohesive society as one that 'works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility.'

This definition shares similarities with that of the Australian Government Australian Social Inclusion Board and with its focus on describing social inclusion (rather than social cohesion). The Australian Government's vision of a socially inclusive society is one in which all Australians have the resources, opportunities, capabilities and support they need to participate fully in the nation's economic and community life, develop their own potential and be treated with dignity and respect.

Social inclusion requires that all individuals be able to:

- learn (participate in education and training)
- work (participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work)
- engage (connect with people, use local services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities); and
- have a voice (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2012).

> Social inclusion is a state of being for an individual. Social cohesion, on the other hand, is a characteristic of a community

Social inclusion is a state of being for an individual. Social cohesion, on the other hand, is a characteristic of a community. Social cohesion is described as something to strive towards.

While there are no universal definitions or indicators used to measure social cohesion, organisations have developed social cohesion models. While the function and intent of these models varies, their models offer themes that are applicable to understanding social cohesion in the context of this study.

Settling on a model for social cohesion was an essential foundation for this research as it provides a vital lens through which to appreciate the impact of volunteer engagement.

2.4   Models of social cohesion

2.4.1   Scanlon Foundation

The Scanlon Foundation's annual survey on social cohesion, conducted since 2007, adopts an approach to map social cohesion based on the following five elements:

- **Participation:** voluntary work, political and cooperative involvement
    - › This domain measures whether a participant has voted in an election; signed a petition; contacted a Member of Parliament; participated in a boycott; attended a protest.
- **Belonging:** shared values, identification to Australia and trust
    - › This domain measures the indication of pride in the Australia way of life and culture; sense of belonging; importance of maintaining Australian way of life and culture.
- **Social justice and equity:** evaluation of national policies
    - › This domain measures views on the adequacy of financial support for people on low incomes; the gap between high and low incomes; Australia as a land of economic opportunity; trust in the Australian government.
- **Acceptance and rejection, legitimacy:** experience of discrimination, attitudes towards minorities and newcomers
    - › This domain measures rejection as indicated by a negative view of immigration from many different countries; reported experience of discrimination in the last 12 months; disagreement with government support to ethnic minorities for maintenance of customs and traditions; feeling that life in three or four years will be worse.
- **Worth:** life satisfaction, happiness and future expectations.
    - › This domain measures satisfaction with present financial situation and indication of happiness over the last year.

Key findings

The results over the past decade show an erosion of social cohesion in Australia over this time. Key findings include:

- increased feelings of discrimination
- increased pessimism
- increased fear or terror and crime in the community
- decreased trust in private and public institutions.

Figure 9: Scanlon Foundation elements of social cohesion

Figure 10 below provides a visual demonstration of the trends and changes to social cohesion in our communities across the past 10 years.
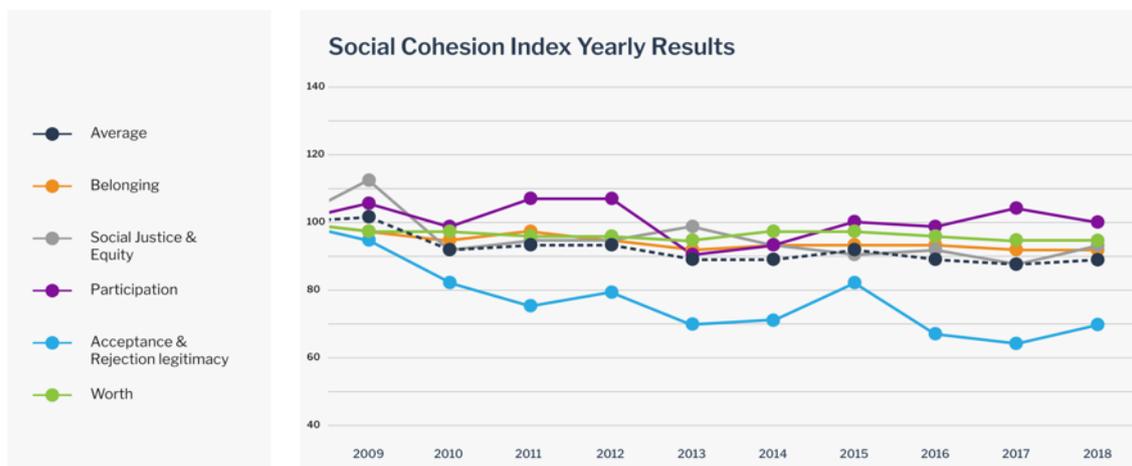
Figure 10: Scanlon Foundation Social Cohesion Index results 2009–2018

In such shifting and precarious social times, volunteering is one form of civic participation that builds community resilience and cohesion. This project sought to understand the current contribution of the volunteering sector in building social cohesion, as well as developing an understanding of how the sector could shift and be supported to more explicitly foster cohesion and resilience within communities.

2.4.2   Bernard domains of social cohesion

Bernard's (1999) domains of social cohesion integrate a conceptual scheme of social cohesion, which is based on two domains. The first domain refers to the activity (economic, political and socio-cultural) and the second refers to the nature of relations (formal/attitudinal and substantial/behavioural). The interaction between the two spheres summarise Bernard's definition of social cohesion containing six components (Figure 11).

Domains	Nature of relations	
	Formal/attitudinal	Substantial/behavioural
Economic	**Inclusion/exclusion** The degree to which people have the opportunity to participate in shared market capacity.	**Equality/inequality** Equality in chances and equality in conditions.
Political	**Legitimacy/illegitimacy** The degree to which public and private institutions act as mediators.	**Participation/passivity** The degree to which people express a voice in public affairs.
Sociocultural	**Acceptance/rejection** The degree to which pluralism is embraced and difference is accepted.	**Affiliation/isolation** The degree to which common values are shared and there is a feeling of belonging.

Figure 11: Bernard's (1999) typology of social cohesion

Bernard's work was based on Jenson's (1998) work which classifies five dimensions of social cohesion: 1) affiliation/isolation, 2) insertion/exclusion, 3) participation/passivity, 4) acceptance/rejection and 5) legitimacy/illegitimacy.

2.4.3   Bertelsmann Stiftung

On a global basis, German organisation Bertelsmann Stiftung conducted a project called the 'Social Cohesion Radar' in which social cohesion is defined as the:

> 'attribute of a collective and expresses the quality of social cooperation. A cohesive society is characterized by close social relations, emotional connectedness, and a pronounced focus on the common good.'
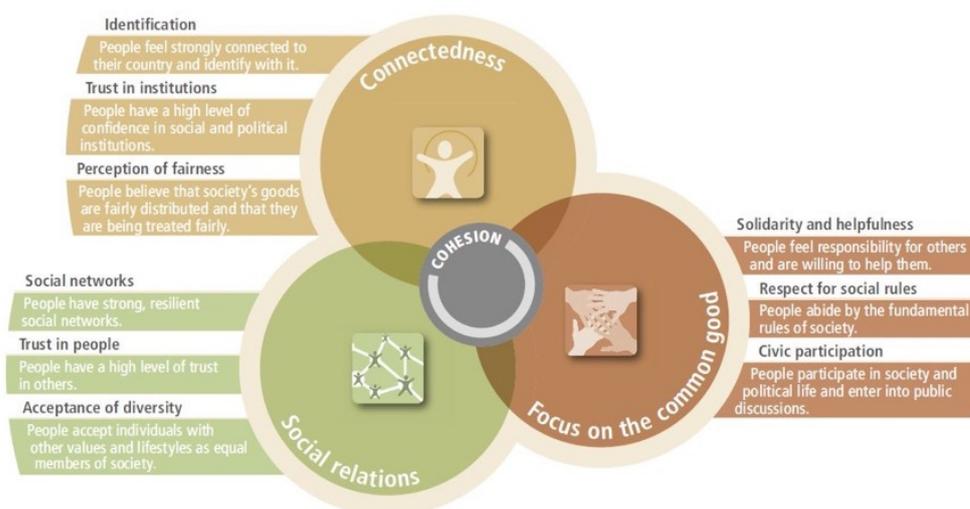
Figure 12: Bertelsmann Stiftung domains and dimensions of social cohesion

The domains and dimensions of this model provide a useful base from which to examine social cohesion.

2.5 Social Cohesion in the Australian Context

In this research we have drawn on the best of global research and based on consultation, adapted it for the contemporary Australian context (Figure 13).

Domains of social cohesion and their dimensions for the Australian context

Access
People have access to places and infrastructure where they can be mutually supportive

Connection
People feel strongly connected to their community and participate in it

Fairness
People feel that opportunities to participate are fairly distributed

Social networks
People have strong, resilient social and support networks

Trust in others
People have a high level of trust in others

Acceptance of diversity
People accept individuals with other values and lifestyles as equals

Solidarity and helpfulness
People feel a responsibility for others and are willing to help them

Civic participation
People are enabled to have a voice in public discussions

Respect for social rules
People abide by the fundamental rules of society

Social participation · Social cohesion · Focus on the common good · Social relations

Figure 13: Social cohesion domains and dimensions for the Australian context

This model provides an essential basis from which to examine the impact effective volunteer engagement has (and could have) on social cohesion and provides a basis for ongoing measurement of social cohesion at local, regional, state and national level.

In section 4 we will look at each domain and dimension and examine the implications for volunteer engagement.

3.   Volunteering in Australia

3.1   The history of volunteering in Australia

As long as people have lived in Australia they have needed to cooperate and engage in collaborative effort in order to survive. First Australians may not have recognised 'volunteerism' as we do today in a post-colonial sense. Aboriginal cultures are rich with concepts of collectivism and responsibility to extended family and community. In that sense, voluntary participation has existed in Australia as long as footprints have marked the ground (Wyatt, Young et al 2012).

> *… voluntary participation has existed in Australia as long as footprints have marked the ground*

Volunteering in its post-colonial sense goes back to the earliest days of European settlement where the colonial government depended heavily on faith-based organisations and other charities to provide for the disadvantaged (FaHCSIA, 2008).

> *… the original aspects of free-will and choice still have strong relevance. We talk of volunteers 'giving their time, 'helping others', and often, 'giving back'*

In fact, it was shortly before European settlement in Australia that the word 'volunteer' found currency in English language. In the 1600s, from the Latin *voluntarius*, meaning willing or of one's own choice, 'volunteer' only had a military connotation. In 1648 Thomas Gage wrote a book using 'volunteer' to refer to someone who went on religious missions. Until the mid-nineteenth century, most dictionaries defined the noun only in its military connotation. Today of course the noun has both community and military connotations. This history is interesting as the original aspects of free-will and choice still have strong relevance. We talk of volunteers, 'giving their time, 'helping others', and often, 'giving back'.

The history of formal volunteering practices and traditions in Australia are therefore derived from the British legacy as a penal colony (Oppenheimer, 2015). These practices are also strongly linked to religious customs in which largely white, Christian, middle-class people sought to enact the teachings of the Bible through 'helping those in need'.

Figure 14: Salvation Army house girls, 1921 (Source: Salvation Army)

Given that we are examining volunteering for its impact on social cohesion it is important to consider this history in contemporary Australia and wonder if any aspects of our current support of volunteering continue to be defined from a predominantly Anglo-Celtic perspective. As we will see below, many cultures, all of whom are represented in Australia's diverse multicultural population, do not have a language or cultural concept for volunteering.

> *Given that we are examining volunteering for its impact on social cohesion it is important to consider this history in contemporary Australia and wonder if any aspects of our current support of volunteering continue to be defined from a predominantly Anglo-Celtic perspective*

Many people who perform voluntary actions do not strongly identify as volunteers. Some forms of volunteering rooted in religion or custom have evolved over generations and are considered a core part of local tradition. Motivations may have become intertwined with feelings of duty and solidarity or with a person's moral code and are often rooted in people's desire to exercise choice and to act spontaneously. These motivations all influence how people understand and interpret voluntary action. Public attitudes to volunteering also differ, with volunteers stigmatised or de-prioritised in some contexts while idealised in others – according to the task, status of the people involved and other factors.

Therefore, it is also important to understand the principles, language and stereotypes that informed the development of the definition for volunteering. According to Maher (2015) issues associated with contemporary definitions are inseparably interweaved with language and stereotypes of volunteering such as 'Lady Bountiful'[1].

The word 'volunteer' as both noun and verb are value laden and its meanings are disputed. For instance, the word 'use' is problematic. Maher (2015) states that forums to discuss and debate issues about formal volunteering and the language of volunteering in the late 1980s and 1990s advocated for a change of language, in which one should not refer to 'using' volunteers but rather 'involving' them. It was hoped that by changing the language, a change in attitude would come in which volunteers were not at the bottom end of the chain of command.

Figure 15: Lady Bountiful from a 1916 cartoon series. Originally coined in the eighteenth-century French play, *Beaux Stratagem*

Similarly, volunteers were discouraged from describing themselves as 'just a volunteer'. It was argued that changing these terms was an issue of respect, that volunteers were 'involved' and not 'used' and that as volunteers played a valuable role in society, using the word 'just' underestimated that value (Ellis, 1997 and Paul, 1999).

In 2015, Volunteering Australia (VA), the national peak body for volunteering undertook a revision of the definition of volunteering in Australia in an effort to contemporise volunteering. Their previous 1996 definition stated:

> 'formal volunteering is an activity that takes place in non-profit organisations or projects and is of benefit to the community and undertaken of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion; for no financial payment; and in designated volunteer positions only'

This definition was closely aligned with the current standard definition from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which defines volunteering as:

> 'the provision of unpaid help willingly undertaken in the form of time, service or skills, to an organisation or group, excluding work done overseas'

These definitions recognised the importance of voluntary activity conducted in an organised context but placed less relative importance on 'acts of kindness and mutual support' done independently.

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[1] A term used to describe a patronising woman, showing off her wealth by acts of generosity.

By 2013, there was widespread acknowledgement across the sector that this definition – only accounting for formal volunteering activities in organisational contexts – was too narrow to reflect the breadth and diversity of volunteer activities taking place across Australia. Volunteering covers a wide range of activities in both formal and informal settings, and includes activities such as corporate volunteering, social enterprise, activism, donated employee time, reciprocity, online or digital volunteering and spontaneous volunteering (ABS, 2018). As such, the revised 2015 VA definition is much broader in scope:

> 'Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain'

This re-definition provides greater visibility and value to a broader range of volunteer activities. The historical data gap in ABS data now looks to be addressed with the ABS redesigning the General Social Survey (GSS) 'to capture informal, online and spontaneous volunteering, as well as maintaining the time series of existing formal volunteering items' (ProBono Australia, 2018).

3.2 Towards the need for a more inclusive definition of volunteering

This research found that the mainstream concept of volunteering and its culturally constructed foundations might not always be shared with people from a non-Anglo-Celtic perspective.

From the traditional Anglo-Celtic perspective, volunteering is seen as a mechanism for those who have the time and resources to 'help those less fortunate'. But how does this frame inform the activities and attitudes of the sector in its current form? How does it act to build true equity? To what extent does it reinforce current power dynamics?

These questions sit at the core of this study. While there is extensive literature and evidence to demonstrate the mutual benefits of volunteering, there is still an undercurrent of the binary in which there are the 'volunteers' and the 'volunteered to', or as one respondent bluntly described it, 'the givers and the takers.'

There is no doubt that this view has contributed to the stereotyping and valorisation of the 'altruistic' volunteer; the idea that the most legitimate or desirable motivation to volunteer is to help others purely for the act of helping, without any consideration for personal gain. Implicit in this framing of volunteering are some problematic power dynamics that create a hierarchy in which the 'volunteer' is of more value than the 'volunteered to', who should be grateful for the charity they have received.

This is not to say that there is anything wrong with volunteering. Quite the opposite! It is one of the positive aspects of Australian society. To see community members turn out to support strangers in the face of a flood, fire or (now) pandemic is almost iconic. To act selflessly in support of others is truly laudable. The giving of time and talent to support a community organisation is absolutely essential to the running of society. However, the first research question we are seeking to inform is:

1. Does our current national volunteering infrastructure contribute to a more cohesive society?

In examining this question, we needed to remain open-minded about what social cohesion looks like from all perspectives. And we needed to understand volunteering from a truly diverse perspective. To do these two things helped to inform our second research question:

2. Is our current understanding of 'volunteering' appropriate to the contemporary context?

We can then develop a vision for not only what volunteering currently is in Australia, but importantly what it can become.

3.3   A word on anti-racism and white-saviourism

Any examination of a model of volunteering that stems back to the colonisation of Australia must deliberatively reflect on issues of unconscious bias, anti-racism and white saviourism.

Layla F Saad's New York Times bestseller, *Me and White Supremacy* defines 'white saviorism' as 'the belief that people with white privilege, who see themselves as superior in capability and intelligence, have an obligation to "save" [people of colour] from their supposed inferiority and helplessness'.

Writer Teju Cole goes one step further in his examination of 'voluntourism' and uses the term 'White Savior Industrial Complex'. Cole writes: 'This term describes the phenomenon of well-intentioned white missionaries and volunteers … traveling to countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to help "rescue" [people of colour] from their country's poverty and lack of development.' He notes that 'little regard is paid to understanding the historical background and cultural contexts they are entering. Much emphasis is placed on such volunteers having the right solutions to the country's issues without listening to and partnering with the people they intend to help.'

> 'The White Saviour Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.' Teju Cole

While this study does not purport to deal with overseas volunteerism we must remain alert to these issues and actively question how the volunteer support sector in Australia can ensure equity of opportunity for all people to participate and ensure that 'giving back,' 'helping' or 'volunteering to...' does not reinforce power inequity or privilege.

3.4   Volunteering from a contemporary perspective

Australia is a country rich in cultural diversity so the infrastructure that supports volunteering must reflect that. One in four Australians were born overseas and we identify with more than 270 ancestries.
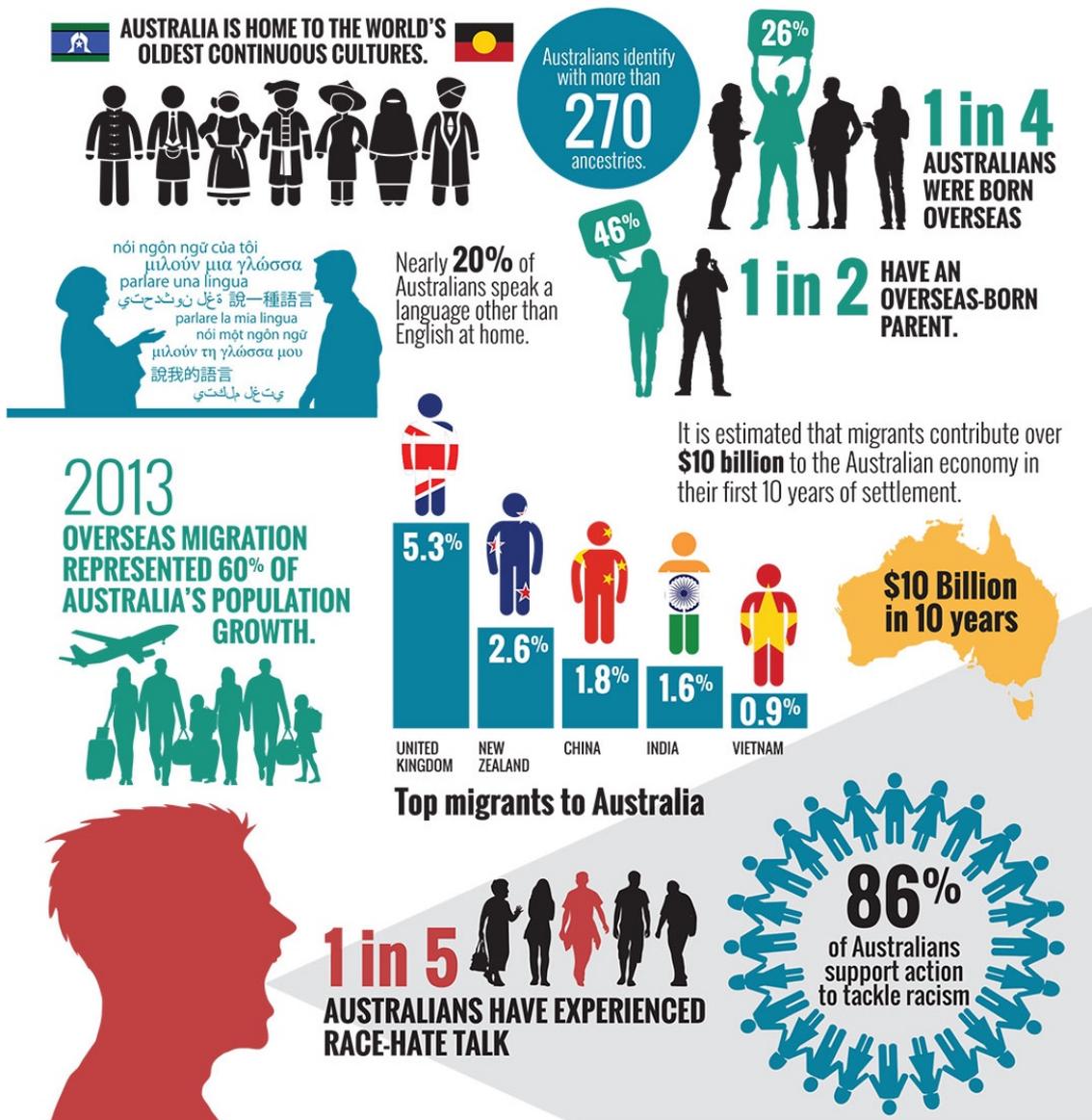
Figure 16: Australian Human Rights Commission – *Face the Facts*

In most languages, there are words to convey the concept of 'support for family and community'. Often influenced by Indigenous traditions, they describe the main ways in which people collectively utilise their talents, time, knowledge and other resources for mutual benefit.

> 'While not labelled as "volunteering", supporting family and community is interwoven with kinship responsibilities and is a fundamental part of self-fulfilment, in stark contrast to an individualised Western understanding of helping' – Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA)

The act of volunteering is well known through the world, even if the word as such is not (UNV, 2011). For Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and Indigenous communities, support for family and community is deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and community practices. These important practices often go unrecognised due to the narrow Western definitions and understandings of volunteering. A survey of VA (2007) reported that 72 per cent of CALD volunteers were involved in informal volunteering and 21 per cent were engaged in formal volunteering through a mainstream organisation.

In their 2016 report 'Giving and volunteering in culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous communities', the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) reported that 'while not labelled as "volunteering" supporting family and community is interwoven with kinship responsibilities and is a fundamental part of self-fulfilment, in stark contrast to an individualised Western understanding of helping' (2016, 7). Rather than 'formal' and 'informal' volunteering, Indigenous participants were more likely to identify as working 'inside' and 'outside' community (CIRCA, 2016).

'There are very high rates of volunteering in multicultural communities, but they wouldn't describe themselves as volunteers' – VRC representative

Another example of volunteerism being deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and community practices is in Norway where the term *Dugnad* describes a custom of communal work: a traditional scheme of cooperation within a social group such as family, neighbourhood, community, geographical area, professional sector or nation. An example is outdoor spring cleaning in urban areas. Dugnad is about contributing time or money. It is also about creating a sense of community and building relationships between neighbours and community members.

In the Arab world, volunteerism and civil society are just new names for age-old traditions. It has been associated with helping people in celebrations or at difficult times and is considered as a religious duty and charitable work. Volunteerism in Arabic is *tatawa'a* عوطت which means donating something. It also means to commit to a charitable activity that is not a religious requirement. It originates from the word *al-taw'a* عوطلا which means compliance, smoothness and flexibility. The concept is taking new forms as a result of modernisation and the development of governmental and non-governmental institutions.

The concept and practice of volunteering result from a unique interplay of social, economic, political and cultural factors.

3.5   Snapshots of volunteering around the world

To illustrate the importance of cultural diversity, we have found great value in Fran Robinson's excellent resource written for Volunteering WA – *A Common Purpose, Formal Volunteering and Cultural Diversity* (2012). The following snapshots have been extracted from that publication to provide readers with a brief insight into cultural diversity in volunteering. They provide a valuable insight into the diversity of ways people might view volunteering and the need for the volunteering infrastructure in Australia to respond to this diversity in order to ensure equity and inclusivity in opportunities to participate.

Afghanistan

Volunteerism in Afghanistan is deeply embedded in religion where helping others is a central principle of the Islamic belief system. The practice of *hashar* is a traditional form of volunteering in Afghanistan whereby people join together to volunteer for activities such as road building, tree planting, harvesting or cleaning canals. *Bigaar* is another common type of community work which is predominantly managed by the government**.**

The word for volunteer in Afghanistan is *razakaar*, pronounced RA-ZAR-KAAR. A group of volunteers is referred to as *razakaraan*, pronounced RA-ZAR-KAR-RUN. These words translate as a person/people who come/s to work for no pay. The word used for volunteering in Afghanistan is *razakaari*, pronounced RA-ZARKAAR-RII which literally translates as 'the act of a *razakaar'*.

'In Afghanistan if you were to volunteer you would just go into the office and say, "Here I am," and off you would go. There's no paperwork. Over here I wasn't aware that you had to do all of the paperwork side of things. I thought it would be similar to Afghanistan, but I wasn't actually aware of that.' – Community quote

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in other Western Balkan countries, the bad memories of voluntary 'working actions' in the socialist period have made the acceptance of the connection between democratic participation and volunteering difficult. However, there has been a significant effort over the last few years by various civil society organisations (Youth Communication Centre Banja Luka, Osmijeh, SEEYN, etc.) to enhance active participation and to promote volunteering.

This has led to a better image of volunteering, mostly among young people and an increased number of young volunteers in the country. However, there is no data available in that regard.

'It is amazing to us that in Australia so many people volunteer and come to volunteer with no pay. I had never heard about volunteering in my country. When I came here and I had to do it to find work, then I saw how many people do it over here. I saw how it was common-sense in Australia'. – Community quote

Myanmar (formerly Burma)

Prior to the military coup in 1962 in Burma there were many community and professional organisations. After the coup, a substantial part of Burmese civil society shut down. Almost all Civil Society Organisations and NGOs were prohibited or came under state control. To get a glimpse of the structure of formal volunteering in Burma right now it is important to look at the past effects of military control over Burmese civil society. Whilst formal volunteering infrastructure in Burma would exist in international NGOs, most Burmese people would not have had the opportunity to come into contact with formalised volunteer policies and procedures.

There is no direct translation of the words volunteer or volunteering in Burmese however a similar word for volunteer in Burmese language is SAY-DA-NA-WON-DAN which literally means working free with good will.

'Working in an Australian organisation, you cannot compare with a Burmese organisation because they have different processes. Every task here is a step by step process. The way people volunteer in Australia was a new idea for us. We found it strange but felt very comfortable because the organisations had volunteer roles and responsibilities, and everyone was treated equally.' – Community quote

Chile

Solidarity is a core value in Latin American and Chilean culture. Helping each other and solidarity are very much part of volunteerism in Chile. Religious-based institutions have had a distinct and historical role in development and volunteerism in Chile. Since colonial times, the Catholic Church have sponsored many volunteer organisations in welfare services in relation to health, education, day-care, and support for the poor, older people, and other vulnerable groups. The 1973 military coup and the ensuing 17 years of military government had a dramatic impact on civil society in Chile. Civil Society Organisations lost most of their autonomy. This resulted in low levels of social confidence and trust and people refrained from active participation in public life. At the end of the dictatorship civil society slowly began to re-emerge. In recent years the formal volunteer sector in Chile has experienced significant growth. Despite the growth of formal volunteering in Chile, volunteering structures and processes within organisations tend to remain relatively informal and unstructured. Consequently, Chilean people may have differing levels of knowledge and experience with formal volunteering structures.

'For my community (in Australia) I think it is so hard to get them involved in things that are not particular to the community. We tend to work so hard for our own community when help is needed but if you ask people to get involved in regular volunteer work at set times and dates, I think they find it a bit scary. Chilean people like to do things on the spot. I don't know many people in my community who volunteer outside.' – Community quote

China

As a vast country, attitudes and understandings of volunteering vary widely. The coastal cities that are close to Hong Kong, Taiwan or Bangkok, are closer to international trends so volunteering is becoming more and more acceptable and popular. For the middle or western areas of China there tends to be less focus and awareness of volunteering in the community.

Recently, China has seen a rapid growth in senior and youth volunteers and volunteer organisations run by college students. This has greatly facilitated the development of volunteer services and the popularity of volunteerism amongst the Chinese public. It is becoming more common for organisations to provide training and reimbursement of expenses to volunteers.

Written volunteer role descriptions and volunteer handbooks are sometimes available to volunteers. Volunteer insurance is not generally provided to volunteers. Popular types of volunteering include the environment and conservation, children and youth, education, health, disability and seniors.

In China people are required to register to volunteer and pay a small amount of money to obtain a volunteer identification card.

There are two Mandarin phrases used to describe volunteering in China. The first, YI-GONG means a worker (gong) who receives no money (yi). The second phrase is ZHI-YUAN-ZHE which translates as people (zhe) who choose to do something without being forced (zhi-yuan).

'I volunteer within the Chinese community (in Australia) but I want to volunteer in any community not just the Chinese community. I understand about volunteering, what volunteers do but I don't understand how to enrol in volunteering here outside of my community.' – Community quote

Croatia

In Croatia, the image of volunteering has been negatively influenced by the socialist period. However, the region is in a period of transition in terms of socio–economic development and the image of volunteering.

Solidarity and help are core values in Slavic culture. Volunteering in Croatia is traditionally related to solidarity. In recent years the Croatian government has worked towards the development of formal volunteering policies and infrastructure. Volunteering in Croatia is defined under the Law on Volunteering as an investment of personal time, effort, knowledge and skills out of free will with which services and activities are executed for the well-being of another person or wider public, and are executed by persons in a way anticipated by this Law, without existence of any conditions of providing a financial reward or seeking any other material benefit for volunteering accomplished.

The word for volunteer in Croatian language is *volonter*. However outside of formal volunteering organisations, other terminology may be used.

'Volonter is a foreign word in our language … it is a borrowed word … would be the real Croatian word for volunteer. Dobrovoljac means a person who is doing a job without pay and wants to do it. Dobro means good. Voljac means will.' – **Community quote**

'All of the volunteering in the village (in Croatia) where my father came from would have been through family and neighbours but not organisations.' – Community quote

France

In France it is common for local people to volunteer informally by helping out friends and neighbours. There are two types of formal volunteering identified by the government; *bènèvolat* and *volontariat*. Both types require individuals to involve themselves without being paid. In *bènèvolat* volunteering programs there is no stipulation on the number of hours per year a person can volunteer. However, in *volontariat* volunteering programs, *voluntaires* are required to volunteer full-time over a long-term period for which they receive social security and compensation.

Formal volunteer infrastructure in France is well developed. Volunteers can claim their out of pocket expenses as tax deductions and organisations provide training and insurance to their volunteers. This is viewed as an incentive for people to invest time in volunteering.

The word *bènèvolat* which means to do an activity without being paid, is a more general term than the English meaning of the word volunteering.

'When I came to Australia, I was looking for work and wanted something else to do until I found employment.' – Community quote

India

In India, local people mostly volunteer informally by helping out friends and neighbours. People also volunteer formally in a group or organisation, however the majority of volunteering undertaken in India is of an informal nature. In general, the act of volunteering is perceived as being part of everyday life and participated in by all of the population. In the Hindu language there is no particular word for the western concept of volunteering. People volunteer out of the sense of conducting 'right action' and following one's '*dharma'* (conscious duty).

There has been a growth in organisations that link volunteers to meaningful volunteer roles. The internet has played a key role in increasing the profile of the formal volunteering sector in India. Corporate, skilled professional, youth and overseas volunteering are becoming increasingly popular and visible in India.

'There's not as much positive vibe and promotion of volunteering in India as you see in Australia. Here you've got organisations that actively promote it. They are being very articulate about it. I guess the difference is that we don't formally reach out in India, we're just there in case help is needed.' – Community quote

Indonesia

The practice of providing *gotong royong* or 'mutual assistance' is a long-entrenched tradition in Indonesian people's daily lives. *Gotong royong* occurs by community members providing volunteer assistance to their neighbours across a range of activities such as wedding ceremonies, funerals and house construction. People also come together to help out in the construction of social facilities such as roads, bridges and places of worship.

In Bahasa Indonesia the word used to describe the act of volunteering is *sukarel*, pronounced SU-KAR-REL. *Sukarelawan* is used to describe a person who volunteers of their own free will.

'When we first came here, I volunteered but I was not very active … After a few weeks I felt that there was nothing for me to do so I just stopped, it wasn't challenging for me.' – Community quote

Iran

Volunteerism in Iran draws its strengths from national values, traditions and religious beliefs. The tradition of serving people is viewed as a sacred religious duty. Iran has a long history of people coming together to form co-operatives and networks of participation. *Vareh* is one example of a popular form of the collective system, whereby milk was collected every day and processed into dairy products. Today, *vareh* co-operatives still operate in some villages and small cities. In rural and urban areas many forms of partnership, self-help, cooperation, and traditional co-ops exist.

Iranian people view the act of donating to charities as a type of volunteer work. Charities are common in Iran. They are well organised and operate all over the country. *Vaghf*, or donating funds to a charity or a cause is an ancient tradition aimed at increasing the standard of living for people.

The word for volunteer in Farsi is *davtalab*, pronounced DARV-TA-LUB, which translates as a person who is ready to help without any expectations. *Davtalabi* pronounced DARV- TA- LUB-BI is used to describe volunteer activities.

'I cannot really compare volunteering in Iran to volunteering in Australia. The main reason for this is that I did not call myself, or nobody called me a volunteer in Iran but in Australia we are part of the institution and labelled as volunteers.' – Community quote

Iraq

Traditional volunteerism in Iraq has an ancient history whereby membership in a particular faith or tribe included the obligation to assist others within your group. This system of mutual support ensured cooperation between members of specific groups and has endured through many decades of conflict and dictatorship which have effectively shut down many civil society organisations in Iraq. Another traditional form of helping that is widely practised across all religions and ethnic groups in Iraq is the practice of *sadaqa* or voluntary almsgiving.

Volunteerism and activism are slowly emerging in Iraqi society. Formal volunteerism is not a familiar concept in Iraqi society.

The Arabic word used for a male volunteer is *mototoway* (pronounced MOTO-TO-WEI) and a female volunteer is *mototowayat* (MOTO-TO-WEI-AT). *Mototowayin* (MOTO-TO-WEI-IN) is used for volunteer groups. *Mototoway* means to provide help, support and assistance without getting any monetary benefit.

'Volunteering in Australia? The first thing is that you get a good experience. The second thing is that you learn how to treat people, how to be polite, it gives you experience for

work. The third thing is you make friendships with people, that is very important and the last is to improve language.' Community quote

Kenya

Kenya has a rich tradition of philanthropy and volunteerism which stems from the communal relationships structure within African society. The concept of *harambee* (the pooling together of resources to provide basic services) is considered a way of life and traditional custom of Kenyans. It is seen as an important way to build and maintain communities. *Harambee* events can be informal activities lasting a few hours, whereby invitations are spread by word of mouth; to formal, multi-day events advertised in newspapers.

Volunteerism is an important component of the not-for-profit sector, volunteers are mainly skill based and include youth, professionals and retirees.

In Swahili language there is no equivalent word for volunteer or volunteering. A word that can be used in the context of volunteering is *kujitolea* (KOO-GII- TOR-LEIGH-A) which means to give of yourself or to sacrifice. This word can also mean a person is going to give something up for something else or to forgo something.

'I might have volunteered in Australia and not realised I was actually volunteering.' – Community quote

'Contacting an organisation in Australia and asking to volunteer is almost too much for some of my friends to contemplate … It's like a lack of confidence, it's almost like they seem intimidated by the whole system.' – Community quote

Malaysia

Traditional mutual support systems are a long-established form of volunteering in Malaysia. Cooperative help or *gotong royong* was a way of life in villages and communities. The practice of *mitabang* involved people working together to plough fields and plant and harvest rice. The practice of *mitanu* involved villagers coming together to help build houses for people in their community.

Today, the volunteer sector in Malaysia has a relatively low profile amongst the Malay public. Voluntary and welfare-based organisations in Malaysia tend not to promote the idea of volunteerism.

The Malaysian word for volunteer is *sukarelawan* (SU-KAR-REL-AR-WUN), which means a person who is willing to do something out of their own interest. The word used for volunteering is *sukarela* (SU-KAR- REL-AR). The same terms are used in Bahasa Indonesia.

'Because of the environment that Australians have grown up in they always know that it is an option to do volunteer work as opposed to Malaysians who don't really think of it as an option, so they aren't as willing to do it … There's lots of people doing it here and there's even a manager for volunteers.' – Community quote

Nepal

Nepal has strong traditions of informal volunteering that are deeply rooted in the cultural-historical concepts of service (*sewa*) and duty (*dharma*). Doing 'good things' and helping others are qualities that are highly valued in Nepalese culture.

In Nepal when something needs to get done in the villages, cooperation is needed from relatives and any groups or clubs in the community. Usually there is not a designated person in the village who is responsible for directing people to help. When people hear of an event or of someone needing help the message will spread by word of mouth and people will spontaneously offer to help. Formal volunteering is slowly expanding in Nepal.

Swayamsewak is the Nepali word for volunteering however its actual meaning translates as 'self- service'. This is connected to a more traditional form of volunteering where an individual would help themselves by helping their community. *Sahayogi* is another Nepali word for volunteering. *Sahayogi karta* means 'a person who does co-operative work'.

'Some people may not have an idea how to go for the volunteer work in Australia. We are from quite different cultures. In Nepal when we want to do volunteer work, we can help each other directly but in Australia we have to go the system way … It's a long process. These differences might mean less people from Nepalese society volunteer in Australia …' – Community quote

Philippines

Volunteerism has had a long history in the Philippines and has evolved from historical and cultural traditions of sharing. The concept of *bayanihan* is particularly prevalent in the farming villages. *Bayanihan* means that people in the community come together to assist each other.

In 2007, volunteering gained statutory status in the Philippines with the introduction of The Volunteer Act. The Act defines volunteerism as 'an act involving a wide range of civilities including traditional forms of mutual aid and development interventions that provides an enabling and empowering environment both on the part of the beneficiary receiving, and the volunteer rendering the act, undertaken for reasons arising from socio-developmental business or corporate orientation, commitment or conviction for the attainment of the public good and where monetary and other incentives or reward are not the primary motivating factor.'

'If I were to encourage a Filipino person new to Australia to volunteer, I'd probably … say that there is a family who needs help and ask them if they would be able to put some time to it. Rather than using the word 'volunteer' I would talk about what was needed to be done and who needed the help.' – Community quote

'When I first started volunteering in Australia it was very difficult because I was only helping out for a few hours I didn't really feel like I was being included … I think that in terms of volunteering one would need to feel that they are included … rather than being given a specific task and doing that task alone.' – Community quote

Serbia

Volunteering in Serbia is traditionally related to solidarity. A traditional and early form of volunteering in Serbian rural communities was called a *moba*. The *moba* is a folk custom in which neighbours, mostly young people, voluntarily help other neighbours with tasks like harvesting and house building.

As with other Western Balkan countries, the image of volunteering has been negatively influenced by the past. Volunteering infrastructure is developing slowly in Serbia, mainly as a result of the efforts of community service organisations.

In 2010, the Serbian Government introduced the Law on Volunteering which outlines reimbursement to be paid to long-term volunteers, insurance for volunteers and safety guidelines.

The word for volunteer in Serbian language is *dobrovoljac*, pronounced DOB-BRO-VOL-YAC. This is the same word that is used in Croatian language.

'We came here after the war as displaced persons … It was important to us to help one another through this difficult time, to learn English to get a job or a good promotion and to learn about Australia and the Australian way of life. We did this by volunteering … It brought happiness and made us feel that this was our home. Today our children and grandchildren volunteer and it is a proud feeling. Australia has been good to us and it is good to return something back, to say thank you.' – Community quote

South Korea

Traditionally, helping systems in South Korea consisted of many self-governing, autonomous, voluntary groups such as community compacts (*hyangyak*), community bureaus and neighbourhood associations (*kye*). Their role was to maintain social order, build public works and regulate welfare. They served to promote community spirit and a sense of shared responsibility for community welfare.

Today, South Korea is developing a volunteer organisation network that includes Volunteer Centres and smaller autonomous volunteer organisations called V-Camps. V-camps operate from community centres, welfare facilities, volunteer organisations, schools, apartments, public offices, religious organisations and companies.

Despite the growing levels of volunteer infrastructure in South Korea, volunteer structures and processes within organisations are still developing.

Sri Lanka

The culture of volunteerism in Sri Lanka is strongly connected to and influenced by religious ideas and practices. *Dana* or 'the practice of sharing and giving' underpins the concept of volunteering and is the key motivator for volunteerism in the country.

While formal volunteer organisations do exist in Sri Lanka, most voluntary work is done at a non-organisational level. The general public's knowledge and awareness about volunteer infrastructure and formal volunteer opportunities is growing but in general, remains

relatively low. Internet sites are taking an increasing role in the promotion of formal volunteering to Sri Lankan youth.

The word for volunteer services in Sinhalese language is *suwecha seyaya* pronounced SOO-WECH-CHA SAY-VA-YA. The word for volunteer worker is *sewecha sevikkavaya* pronounced SOO-WECH-CHA SEVIK-KA-KAV-VA-YA.

'Actually, in Sri Lanka the concept of volunteering is not well understood. This is because the concept of being helpful to one another happens all the time.' – Community quote

'In Sri Lanka the emphasis tends to be more on collecting donations which pay for things to be done. In Australia, I think volunteering has a larger emphasis on giving up time and effort rather than money to help other people.' – Community quote

Sudan and South Sudan

Traditional mutual support systems are strongly embedded in Sudanese society. The practice of *naffir* involves neighbourhood or community groups coming together to help build houses or harvest crops. The group disbands when the work is completed.

Most volunteer activity occurs in faith-based and community groups where formal volunteering structures and processes are not commonly practised. In general, participation in volunteering is more episodic and informal in nature where people come together when a need arises.

'Some Sudanese are very happy to go into an organisation, a religious or social organisation, to support and help others. Most of the organised volunteering in Sudan comes from religious organisations. The other volunteering, the informal one, it is part of the society. Different communities and tribes will create their own organisations, their own groups to support and help, to volunteer.' – Community quote

Vietnam

Historically, volunteerism in Vietnam has its roots in both Confucianism and Communism. The core values of community, charity and helpfulness reflect underlying Vietnamese culture and lifestyle.

Traditional Vietnamese helping systems were known as 'labour exchange groups' or 'mutual aid groups'. Members were typically linked by kinship, neighbour or friend relationships. Volunteering has rapidly developed in Vietnam with youth participation in volunteering being high and continuing to grow.

The word for volunteering in Vietnamese language is *tình nguyện*, pronounced DIN WII-YUN. The word for volunteer is *tình nguyện viên*, pronounced DIN WII-YUN VII-YUN. The concept of volunteering may be understood in terms of self- sacrificing thoughts or actions that help others in need for the purpose of the community, the nation, for the sake of the motherland and the people.

'Vietnamese people like to do things together in a group. If one person in the group knows someone from outside the group who they trust to do with volunteering, they can

introduce the other group members to this person and the others will trust this person also. This personal link is important.' – Community quote

To serve the cultural diversity of Australia, our approach to enabling participation must be broadened to reflect that diversity. These snapshots, and the community quotes within them illustrate the challenges many people experience when encountering the current volunteering infrastructure.

3.6 Voluntary activity today

3.6.1 Volunteering participation rates

Australia has one of the highest rates of formal volunteering in the world, with an economic contribution estimated between $43–$200 billion to national GDP annually (Mitchell, 2016). The latest General Social Survey (GSS) data reported that three in ten people are volunteers (ABS,2014a).

> *Being educated, married and having a well-paying job all contribute to higher rates of volunteering*

According to various studies, in general, being educated, married and having a well-paid job all contribute to higher rates of volunteering (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Do Good Institute, 2019).

These findings are consistent with the ABS GSS 2014 data in which the majority of people participating in voluntary work were:

- Female (54 per cent)
- More likely to be of a younger age, with 42 per cent of people aged 15–17 volunteering, followed by 39 per cent of people aged 35–44 and 35 per cent of people aged 65–74
- Holding a Bachelor degree or above (41 per cent)
- Couples with dependent children (38 per cent)
- Employed, either part-time (38 per cent) or full-time (30 per cent)
- People living in households with the highest quintile of gross household income (39 per cent)
- Living in outer regional or remote areas (39 per cent)
- English as the main language spoken at home (33 per cent).

However, the rates of formal volunteering in Australia are decreasing. Between 2010 and 2014 there has been a 5 per cent decrease in formal volunteering of adults from 36 per cent (6.5 million) to 31 per cent (5.8 million) (ABS, 2014a). This decrease reflects the broader changes noted in the GSS of a decrease in the levels of involvement in activities that connect people to their broader community.

The ABS *Measures of Australia's progress, 2013* also noted a decrease in the time and opportunity that Australians have for recreation and leisure, and social and community interaction (ABS 2014b). The proportion of people providing help and assistance, such as home maintenance jobs, gardening, running errands and unpaid childcare to others outside their household, also declined from 49 per cent in 2010 to 46 per cent in 2014 (ABS 2014b).

At the same time, numbers of young people aged 15–17 years volunteering have increased from 16 per cent in 1995 to 27.1 per cent in 2010. In 2014, 42 per cent of young people aged 15–17 years participated in voluntary activity, the highest of any age group (ABS, 2014a). However, the volunteer behaviour of younger people is less traditional and at times 'invisible' as they make use of their digital and technology skills to support organisations, causes and interest groups that align with their values.

Despite high levels of volunteer engagement in Australia, more volunteers are needed to fill existing volunteer roles, with approximately **86 per cent of volunteer-involving organisations requiring more volunteers** (VA, 2016).

3.6.2   Changing volunteer expectations

Australians are looking for a wider range of ways to volunteer than current roles and opportunities allow**.** Sector-wide survey data suggests that volunteers and potential volunteers are looking for **more meaningful roles with greater flexibility in both how and when they volunteer** (VA, 2016). Some examples of this include increased interest in episodic volunteering, online/digital volunteering, informal and autonomous volunteering, skilled volunteering and corporate/workplace volunteering.

Another contributor to the changing nature of volunteering is the impact of the gig economy on the social sector, a labour market characterised by the prevalence of short-term contracts and freelance work rather than permanent jobs. The short-notice, variable work schedules and lack of standardised work conditions and protections such as paid leave all contribute to a labour force that cannot satisfy traditional volunteer requirements of committing to a set day of the week or a number of days each month. This kind of fixed commitment is simply not achievable or desirable to many members of the gig economy, in which young people are over-represented. There is now increasing demand for volunteer opportunities to be flexible in terms of days, times and locations and connected to an issue or cause that affirms the volunteer's sense of purpose, rather than an activity undertaken purely to service the needs of others.

3.6.3   Funding for cohesion – the new opportunity

Current funding models for the volunteer sector have not changed since 1987, but our communities have. Over the past decade alone, the population in Australia has risen substantially from 19.9 million people in 2006 to 25.4 million in 2019 (ABS, 2019). At the same time, we are grappling with big and complex issues, including the changing nature of work, an ageing population, lack of affordable housing, rising wealth inequality, climate change, migration, political instability and rapid technological change. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the social and economic challenges that we face as a society, and the increasing need to rethink and respond to these emerging needs.

> *Society has changed drastically, but our systems and structures haven't*

The following chart demonstrates just a few of the structural shifts. The current funding model, with its foundations developed in 1987, has engendered a strong focus on recruitment, training and matching volunteers. In the 33 years since the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA) model evolved society has changed dramatically. This 'transactional' approach is no longer relevant for the needs of contemporary communities.

1987		2020
Population of 16.4 million		Population of 25.4 million — 54% population growth since 1987
21% of Australians born overseas — 14% speak a language other than English at home		33% of Australians born overseas — 21% speak a language other than English at home
Federal government funds 85% of higher education costs		Federal government funds 58% of higher education costs
80% of the labour force works full-time		Casualisation of labour force, gig economy — Longer hours for full-time workers
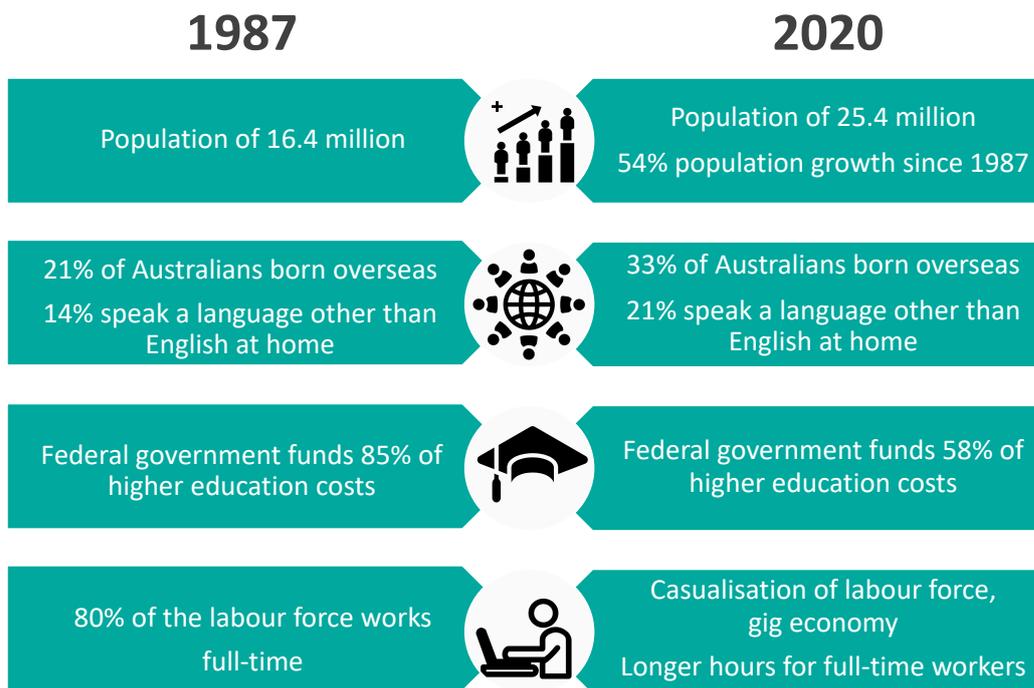
Figure 17: Statistics 1987 versus 2020

The current Australian Government has committed to providing **$18.8 million from 1 January 2018 to 30 June 2021** as part of the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA). This funding provides funding to Volunteer Support Services and Volunteer Involving Organisations to encourage, support and increase participation in volunteering.

At the same time, there is a growing need and expectation that communities can be more resilient and will self-organise in the face of disaster and disruption. Despite the literal meaning of the expression, 'self-organisation' doesn't always happen spontaneously. The conditions need to be in place to allow spontaneous self-organisation. The current model of volunteer support can be supplemented to contribute to the fostering of these conditions for communities to be more ready to act in mutual support.

> 'Volunteering cannot contribute to social cohesion without the right infrastructure behind it.
>
> The sector needs long-term ongoing commitment so organisations are not constantly chasing their tail and can focus on the job at hand so they can grow, support volunteering and make sure that the volunteering experience is good. **It needs the infrastructure to create good social outcomes.**' – VRC representative

4. A need to see building social cohesion differently – from 'volunteering' to 'participatory action'

4.1 Fostering participation to build social cohesion

Action taken voluntarily for the common good clearly takes many forms.

Volunteering Australia recognised this in 2015 when they adopted a broader and more inclusive definition of volunteering as 'time willingly given for the common good without financial gain'.

This research has found that, if one of the desired outcomes from the support of the volunteering infrastructure is social cohesion, then the sector needs to be supported to do more than transacting 'time willingly given for the common good without financial gain'.

As we saw in section 2 (repeated here in Figure 18), social cohesion is contingent upon the characteristics of a community, not the circumstances of an individual. Put simply, social cohesion is the degree to which communities participate, accept diversity, have a voice in public discussion and focus on the common good. To achieve this, the Australian volunteer support structure needs to adopt a more transformative approach to increasing participatory action.
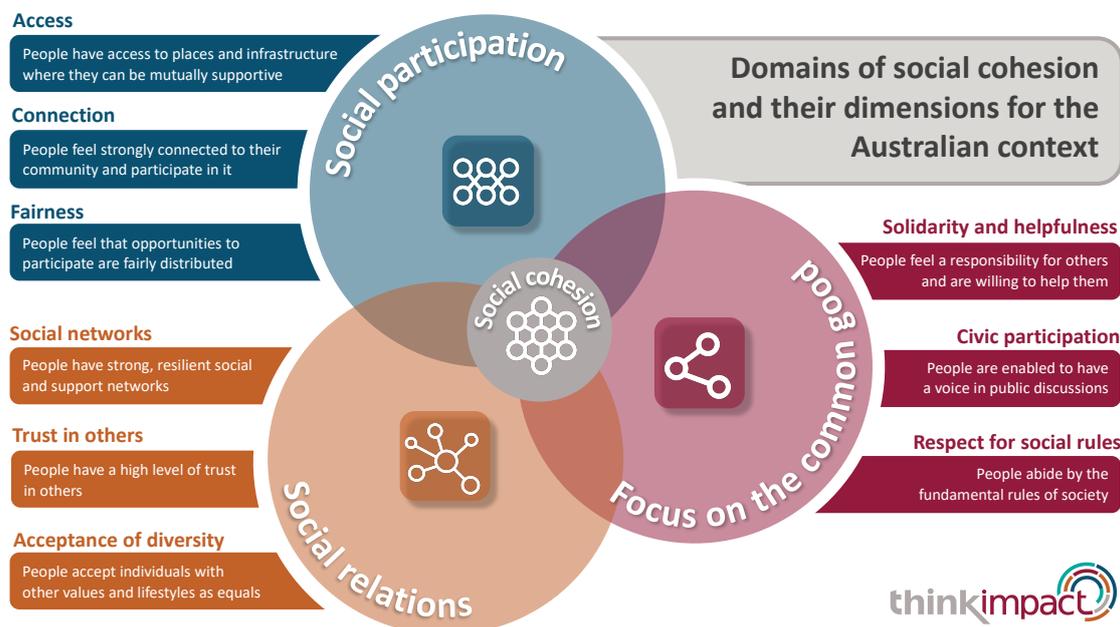
Figure 18: Domains and dimensions of social cohesion

Volunteers perform vital work in our communities in both informal and formal capacities, the value of which goes beyond financial measures.

If voluntary activity is going to have a more substantial impact on social cohesion, a broader notion of volunteering – that moves beyond current language of volunteering – is needed. This would be inclusive of all the things that individuals and communities can be supported to do that aren't considered volunteering. It includes supporting people to get involved in group activities. It includes supporting

people to act for the common good. It includes empowering people to act in their own (and their communities') interests. It includes building on strengths. It includes breaking down power imbalances sometimes unwittingly reinforced by traditional volunteering. It includes all the things embraced by the ideals of asset-based community development.

In its simplest form, this study found it was referred to as 'participation'. Both formal and informal volunteering are forms of participation in one's community. This is the language we have adopted – 'participation' and 'participatory action'.

Using the word 'participation' encourages us to think about volunteering and engagement in a much broader sense. Instead of focusing on engagement exclusively in terms of a structured volunteer program or activity, we are talking about engagement in communities and society in formal, informal and incidental ways. This is an important distinction.

> *An individual can embark on a broad spectrum of participatory action – from a simple, random act of kindness through to dedicated social innovation efforts such as the development of a social enterprise.*

If we are talking about increasing participation in the community and building social cohesion, then we also need to talk about how communities and community infrastructure can better support this kind of engagement. An acknowledgement of traditional volunteer engagement practices as simply *one* form of participation compels us to consider the different ways people can participate *and* how communities can better enable participation. An individual can embark on a broad spectrum of participatory action – from a simple, random act of kindness through to dedicated social innovation efforts such as the development of a social enterprise.

This element of reciprocity (looking at how individuals can participate in community as well as how communities can better support participation) avoids placing the responsibility on individuals and groups, particularly marginalised groups, to simply get active and involved at a community level. Not everyone has access to or feels comfortable participating in community-building activities, particularly if they have experienced exclusion or marginalisation in the first place.

While certain forms of volunteering can reinforce uneven power dynamics, particularly when there is an emphasis on 'volunteers' and the 'volunteered to', framing volunteering as a form of participation may help break down these power imbalances by focusing on the many ways that people can participate in community – the value comes from being involved, not only from your ability to perform a particular role.

Participation goes beyond getting formally involved in structured volunteer activities. From this research, we have developed the concept of the Participatory Action Dimensions (below), which seeks to articulate a broader perspective for the different ways that people can participate in communities and society.

Figure 19: Participatory Action Dimensions

Participatory Action Dimension 1: Formal Volunteering

Formal volunteering

The current focus of most volunteer support activity, this encompasses time willingly given for the common good, without financial gain and taking place in an organisational setting. Examples include formally acknowledged volunteer roles with organisations like Red Cross, Landcare, or a community sporting club.

Formal volunteering has long been the major mechanism through which volunteer support organisations have enabled participation in voluntary action. In a survey of over 3,000 volunteers in the *State of Volunteering in Australia* study conducted by PWC for Volunteering Australia in 2016, formal volunteering accounted for 48 per cent of activity. A further 40 per cent undertook both formal and informal volunteering and 6 per cent undertook only informal volunteering. By far the most common motivation for volunteering was 'to give something back to the community'. Interestingly, only about 3 per cent cited 'to gain skills and experience', about 1 per cent cited 'as a pathway to employment' and 0.4 per cent cited 'to make professional connections'. However, the act of participation and being connected undoubtedly opens people to more employment options. The survey also highlighted that formal volunteering is not without its challenges. While the majority have an excellent experience, many

volunteers report concerns about inflexibility of volunteer roles, onerous administration requirements and insufficient training and professional development. The most commonly improved skill gained by volunteers (cited by 60 per cent) is 'patience' followed by 'teamwork' and 'confidence' (both 55 per cent).

> *By far the most common motivation for volunteering was 'to give something back to the community'*

Participatory Action Dimension 2: Informal volunteering

Informal volunteering

Individuals can contribute to social cohesion by giving their time willingly outside an organisational setting. Examples might include regularly caring for a friend's child, participating in a street clean up activity or tending to a community garden.

Over the past decade or so there has been increased recognition of the value of informal volunteering. Volunteering Australia formally adopted a new definition to recognise this in 2015: Informal volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place outside the context of a formal organisation. The most commonly cited informal volunteering activity is providing care to someone else in the community (excluding family members) followed by mentoring or teaching others, informally assisting sports clubs and teams and providing welcoming and settlement activities to new members of the community.

This is a difficult area for the volunteer sector to significantly influence yet it is clearly important for social cohesion. The difficulty stems from the fact that most informal volunteering happens spontaneously and through personal networks. This area of volunteering is under-recognised and under-supported yet during the COVID-19 pandemic it is this area of volunteering that has flourished.

Getting involved

Simply getting involved in group activities contributes to social cohesion. Whether it's attending a book club, playing a team sport, playing music with others or speaking out on a social issue, this dimension plays a key role in bringing communities together.

Getting involved is not currently considered volunteering. Yet it is the essence of social participation and essential to building social cohesion. This activity currently is not widely supported in a structured way within the volunteer support sector.

In some parts of the world, notably the UK, the concept of 'social prescribing' has grown in popularity as a medical approach to address the social determinants of health. Social prescribing enables GPs and health professionals to refer patients whose health or mental health is affected by non-medical factors such as housing, financial stress, health literacy, loneliness or social exclusion to a range of community services to support them to get involved in activities that can help (Boydell, 2019). This model can be replicated before loneliness and social exclusion develop into a health issue by running programs and activities that promote the benefits of getting involved and support people into participation.

The ability for people to get involved has been dramatically curtailed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of sense of community is having a substantial impact on many people's wellbeing.

Acting in mutual support

Individuals can contribute to social cohesion by acting in support of each other in ways that don't fall into the concept of volunteerism. Examples might include acting for a stranger in need, supporting an acquaintance to navigate an administrative task, bringing in a neighbour's rubbish bin or providing career guidance to a friend.

Sometimes equated with informal volunteering (but not usually by the person who acts), the simple practice of just being good to each other and acting for the common good contributes enormously to social cohesion. The ability and willingness for people to act with kindness, generosity and mutual support is undermined by many structural factors including divisive political rhetoric, racism, self-centredness, and an economic rationalism that drives inequitable distribution of wealth and opportunity. These factors can be mitigated yet there is little in the way of community-level facilities or resources to organise and activate communities to be mutually supportive. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many communities have been inventive in finding their own ways to deliver random acts of kindness. Who knows what might have been possible if the volunteer support sector was properly resourced to support this type of participation?

Social innovation is the vital fifth participatory action dimension. It is the activity associated with developing and implementing solutions to challenging and often systemic social and environmental issues in support of social progress. Increasingly we are seeing the rise of business models which act to address social challenges. Often these take the form of social enterprises – organisations which blend commercial and social outcomes. Social innovation captures those deliberative actions that go above and beyond traditional ideas about volunteerism. Examples might include social enterprise development, community adoption (and volunteer operation) of otherwise unviable businesses which are important to the community, or community renewal planning. Social innovation often draws on volunteering, participation and the desire to act for mutual benefit.

5. The potential for social cohesion

5.1 Introducing the potentiality map

A key question that this research explores is *what models of volunteer engagement contribute to social cohesion?*

Drawing upon the adopted model of social cohesion, its three domains and nine dimensions, the following section introduces potentiality maps. Potentiality maps are used to illustrate the degree to which the volunteer sector currently contributes to each dimension of social cohesion based on findings and observations from the research, and an indicative potential for that contribution based on suggested activities and an expanded view of volunteering engagement.

5.2 Social participation

The degree to which people are able to access opportunities and fairly participate in their community is a key domain of social cohesion. This domain of social cohesion includes the following dimensions:

- Access
- Connection
- Fairness.
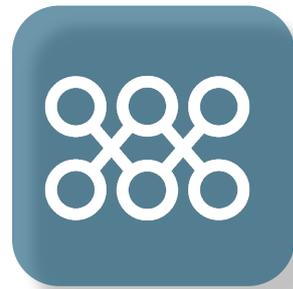
As illustrated below, the fairness and access dimensions have the most potential to increase their contribution to social cohesion. The following section outlines the current contribution for each dimension and suggested activities for its potential contribution.
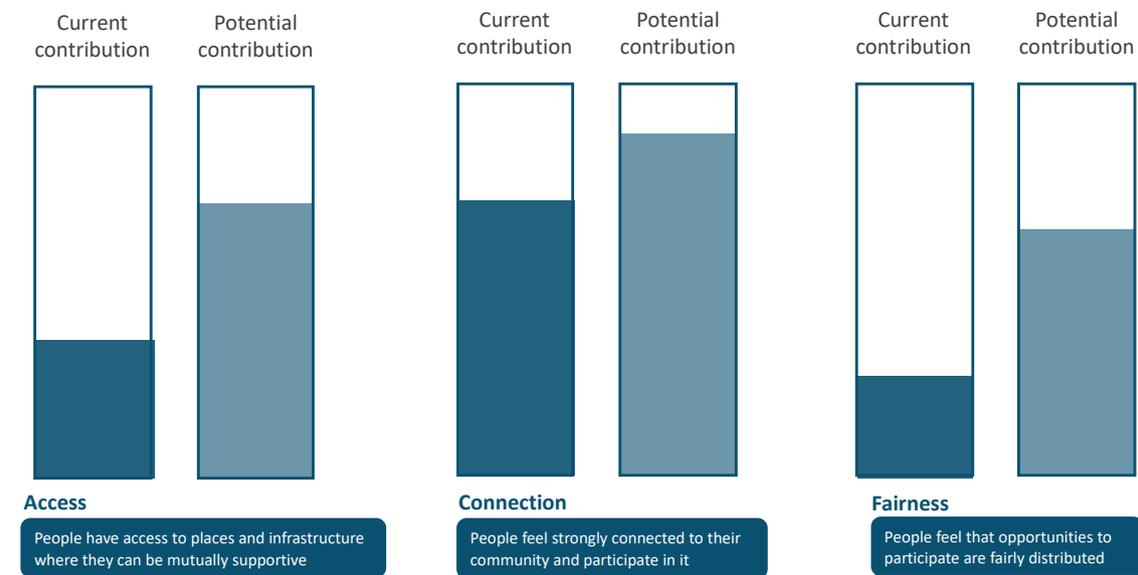
Figure 20 Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the three dimensions of social participation

Current
contribution

Potential
contribution

Access

People have access to places and infrastructure
where they can be mutually supportive

A key dimension of this domain is the degree to which people can
access places and infrastructure to meet and build connections
and mutual support.

Examples might include the provision of access to physical or
virtual spaces and resources for use by the community, such as
buildings, rooms, food vans, transport, commercial kitchens,
websites and digital resources, facilitating access to these assets
by informing community of their availability, outreach and other
engagement activities and designing spaces that make them feel
safe, welcoming and inclusive.

ACCESS

**Figure 21: Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'access'
dimension of social cohesion**

Current contribution – why this rating?

- The provision of community-owned infrastructure, in all its forms, is not typically supported through
  volunteer support services. However, there are examples of organisations that have found a way to
  provide community-owned and managed infrastructure, which has resulted in access to
  opportunities for community-led informal volunteering and participation. These spaces provide
  opportunities for community determined activities to occur. In many places however, community
  centres have become a space to rent, rather than a place to build communities.

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to access resources by community has been critical for
  organisations' ability to pivot their activities during restrictions and in many instances those that did
  not own or manage their infrastructure were forced to stop.

- Existing formal volunteer practice has the potential to create barriers and exclude people from
  participation in volunteering because people seeking opportunities can be assessed as lacking the
  skills, time, flexibility or experience for the volunteer job. In a formal setting, only selected people
  (volunteers) get the job (are provided with access).

  'Community centres have become a space to rent not a place to build communities' – VRC
  representative

Unlocking the potential

As outlined above, there is a diversity of assets and opportunities that exist in the community that can
contribute to social cohesion.

The volunteer support services have great potential, with the right support and investment, to
contribute to social cohesion by considering these activities:

- Provision of more community building infrastructure (physical, resources, skills, knowledge, virtual)
- Provision of access to community-owned infrastructure where informal volunteering and
  participation can take place, breaking down structured barriers and involving people who may not
  get involved in formal volunteering

- Provision of more hyper-local community assets through a hub and spoke model of community infrastructure. Neighbourhood Houses are an example of existing community infrastructure that exist in some communities. A feature of these places and spaces is that they are not a commercial centre with the expectation and pressure to spend money to belong
- Support community determined activities for communities to have agency over the activities and where underrepresented communities have a place where they 'belong'.
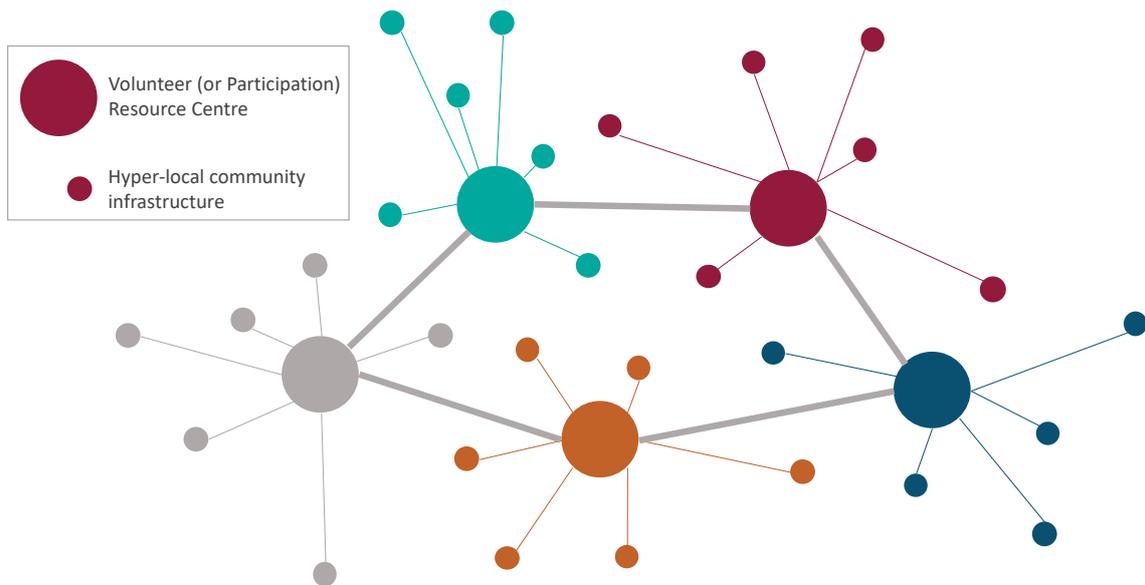

Figure 22: A hub and spoke model for delivery of hyper-local community infrastructure

Connection

> People feel strongly connected to their community and participate in it

Participation by, in and for the community can take many forms, from random acts of kindness to structured volunteer roles in formal organisational settings.

The myriad ways that people can participate and be recognised for this contribution continues to evolve, with critical changes to the definition of volunteering occurring in 2015, when Volunteering Australia broadened the definition to 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain'.

The change in definition responded to the growing recognition that the rates of informal volunteering and the contribution being made by the community for the community is being under reported.

At the same time, there was growing recognition that the sector has…

'… become obsessed with formality and structure … trying to put the label of volunteer on people … when it is still an exclusive activity – why are we doing that?' – VRC representative

Current contribution · Potential contribution

CONNECTION

Figure 23: Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'connection' dimension of social cohesion

The volunteering sector, with its 2015 definition of volunteering, has the remit to expand and evolve its activities towards creating much broader opportunities for community participation in all of its forms. And through this opportunity comes connection, greater participation and strengthened social relations, key dimensions of social cohesion.

'Volunteering is about the job that needs to be done … it is not about the individual' – VRC representative

Current contribution – why this rating?

- There are many examples across the community of volunteer activities enabling connections between individuals with diverse experiences and backgrounds, however opportunities for participation can be limited by the need to label the person a 'volunteer'. Being a 'volunteer' has the potential to exclude those that are not 'right' for the job, by creating barriers in the engagement approach and type of opportunity available (for example online recruitment of volunteer positions, matching people who are time scarce, other abled, or who speak English as second language)
- People have diverse motivations for volunteering, and in many scenarios, managers across the volunteer sector reflected that volunteer activities often do not consider the individual and their potential contribution, rather that 'volunteers are seen as a free resource.'
- The need to measure and report voluntary activity to meet funding requirements has also imposed barriers for some. One manager reflected that they contributed to the problem with 'administrative corralling – against their will and participation we have to impose online barriers' to meet volunteer registration requirements *How many volunteers are recruited? How much training has been delivered? How many hours of volunteering has been provided?*

Unlocking the potential

The volunteer sector is well placed to grow connections, by expanding opportunities for all types of participatory action.

- Greater acknowledgement and support provided to the volunteer sector to expand their role in promoting and enabling opportunities for participation from random acts of kindness for formal volunteering and their importance for connections.

'We are unconsciously limiting ourselves' – VRC representative

Fairness

People feel that opportunities to participate are fairly distributed

Current contribution   Potential contribution

It has been acknowledged and observed during this research that the current activity of recruiting, training and matching people to volunteer positions within VIOs can create barriers to participation. And as more activities move online, the gap to opportunities is widening for those that lack language and digital literacy skills and confidence – creating isolation and exclusion.

Research has shown that higher rates of volunteering are associated with being educated, married and having a well-paying job (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Do Good Institute, 2019).

In a survey of VIOs, 46 per cent of respondents were unable to recruit or engage volunteers with barriers, with 51 per cent sighting their lack of resources such as funding, staff supervision time, and the necessary skills to involve volunteers with barriers (VA, 2016).
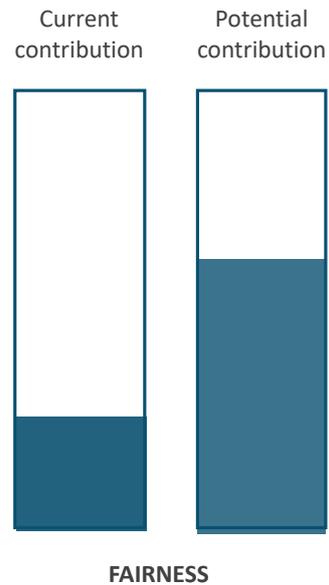
FAIRNESS

Figure 24: Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'fairness' dimension of social cohesion

'We have seen a decline in formal volunteering, and some of the more traditional organisations have found it hard to shift their mindset and to create new ways of engaging volunteers. It is an issue that we deal with.' – VRC representative

Current contribution – why this rating?

- Matching volunteers to volunteer positions can result in cherry picking people, with volunteer engagement focused on those with skills, and excluding people who don't meet certain criteria
- There is growing awareness in the sector that the activity may re-enforce social hierarchies and power dynamics of the volunteer and the 'volunteered to'
- Volunteers are used as manpower as opposed to developing volunteer roles to suit individual skills and experience.

'A mindset shift is required. How do we support people and make adjustments? How do we address anxiety … lots of barriers to participation e.g. transport …' – VRC representative

Unlocking the potential

Taking a broader perspective on voluntary action has the most potential to contribute to social cohesion.

- Facilitate the right support to overcome barriers to participation. This might include transport solutions are needed to facilitate engagement in community activities or services (RACGP, 2019).
- Ensure no disadvantage – voluntary action must have a strong equity focus (RACGP, 2019).

- Mindset shift – move from seeing volunteers as a resource to seeing the individual, facilitating connections across all forms of difference (age, culture, experience, diversity).
- Provide help with service and system navigation and access (RACGP, 2019).

'…people who have the resources to volunteer are preferred by VIOs' (for example time, money for out of pocket expenses) – VRC representative

Example from the field: 'Our Place' - Mernda Community House

At Mernda Community House in the peri-urban north of Melbourne, people from the local community come together to informally share their skills and provide mutual support bridging age, cultural and economic diversity. The building is a rare asset in a community in which most infrastructure is dedicated to commercial activities that are accessed by cars.

At the outset Mernda Community House was not about volunteering – it was about providing a hyper-local community asset – for people to come together to 'build a place that is theirs.' Mernda Community House is funded not through VRC funding but alternative sources of funding. It has been included as an example here because it illustrates the need for the community to have **access** to community infrastructure to create informal volunteering and participation opportunities. In doing so, this access contributes to social cohesion.

'Volunteering was considered a non-essential activity during COVID-19 restrictions creating greater vulnerability'

Example from the field: COVID-19 times

The Bendigo Volunteer Resource Centre (BVRC) based in regional Victoria provides volunteer resource services across the Greater Bendigo region. During the COVID-19 pandemic the organisation has been forced to close its doors. The organisation is located in a building owned and managed by the local council, and under council directions its activities were deemed non-essential, at a time when the community needed support most. Losing access to their building put a strain on BVRC's activities. At the same time, VRCs in other regions, faced with the same lockdown restrictions were able to pivot their activities for community benefit and continue to operate as managers of their own assets. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the organisation to think differently about what they do, and the role that they have played and could play in the community.

5.3   Social relations

The degree to which people have strong natural support networks, trust in others and accept others with different values and lifestyles as equals, constitute the domain of social cohesion known as 'social relations'. The aspect of cohesion is often to most obvious and apparent. It is also the domain which appears to be readily vulnerable

in the face of divisive political rhetoric and entrenched or emergent racism. It is also the domain known to be a social determinant of health.
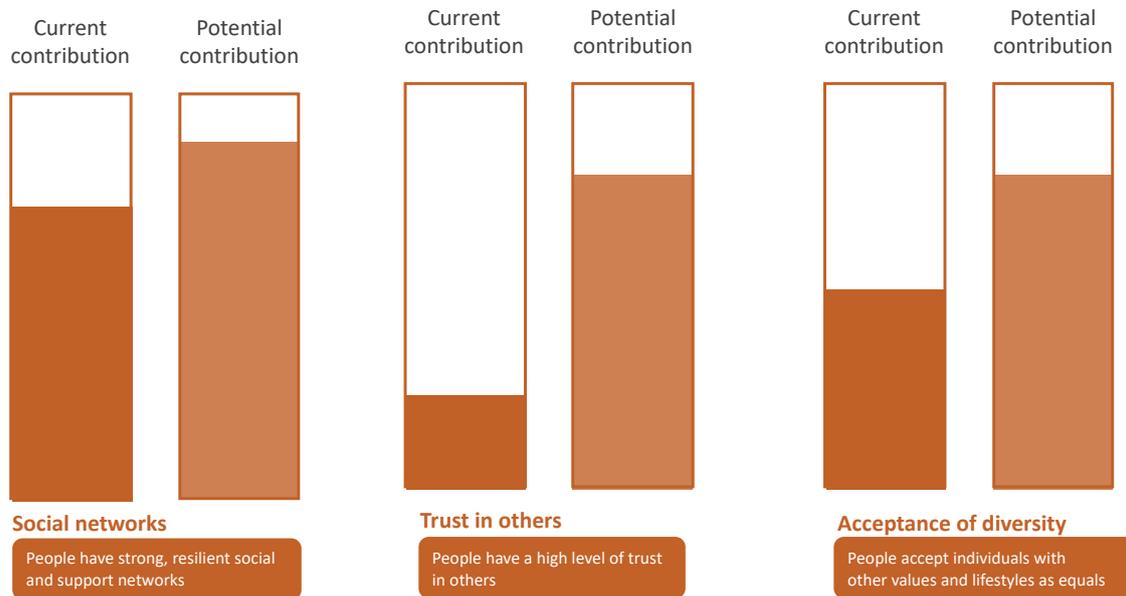

Figure 25 Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the three dimensions of social relations

This domain of social cohesion includes:

- Social networks
- Trust in others
- Acceptance of diversity.

Social networks

People have strong, resilient social and support networks

There is growing evidence that human health is influenced by our social environment, which can either strengthen or undermine the health of individuals and communities. Factors of our social environment, regarded as social determinants of health, include income, education, social support, conditions of employment and power. (AIHW, 2016). There is also growing recognition that siloed health and community services are 'inadequate to meet the increasingly complex health and social needs of patients' (RACGP, 2019).

Participatory action has great potential to contribute to this dimension of social cohesion. One such opportunity is through better integrating our healthcare system with community participation through **social prescribing**. Social prescribing provides a way to improve patient care outcomes in a holistic way, and recognises the social, emotional and environmental factors that contribute to wellbeing.
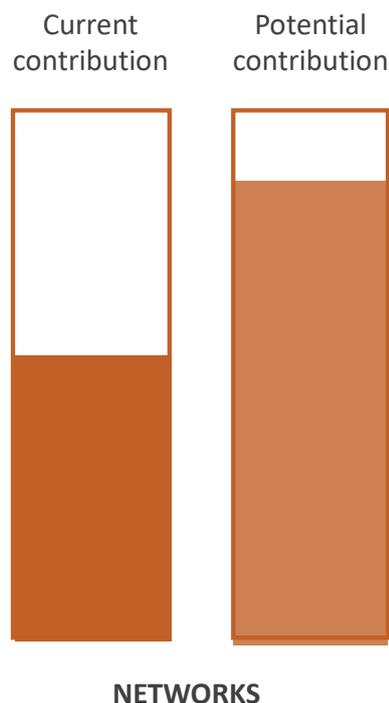
Current contribution

Potential contribution

NETWORKS

Figure 26: Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'social networks' dimension of social cohesion

A recent report by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) and the Consumers Health Forum of Australia argues for a 'strategic and systematic approach to incorporating social prescribing into the Australian healthcare system' 'and to see a shift from a focus on illness to wellness' (RACGP, 2019). Social prescribing enables GPs, nurses and other primary care health professionals to refer people to non-clinical, local community activities and services. Examples include formal volunteering, arts activities, group learning, gardening, befriending, sports and cooking.

The RACGP report acknowledges that everyone can benefit from social prescribing, however focused on five cohorts in the study:

- people experiencing mental health issues
- people with chronic physical conditions and multimorbidity
- people experiencing social isolation, including young people
- children in the first 1000 days of life
- older people.

In the UK, social prescribing has been adopted across the health care system and is 'not about throwing out the medical model … but about giving people choice and control over their care'. From the UK experience, a key attribute is the 'strong commitment to, and investment in social prescribing, with **link workers** seen as key enablers to support individuals with psychosocial solutions' (RACGP, 2019, p.2,). This example has implications for the type of support and investment required to enable the existing volunteer sector to better integrate with the healthcare system.

'Volunteers can't stand being given tasks that are meaningless or a waste of time – "doing something for the sake of doing it". For the experience to be best they want to see the contribution they are making. They need to see an outcome for someone or something, the importance of being connected to the impact.' – VRC representative

Current contribution – why this rating?

- Formal volunteering provides essential services across the community engaging high calibre, reliable volunteers. Examples include health services and disability support where continuity of care and relationship-building over time are integral to the positive experience of individuals and the community.
- Existing formal volunteer practice has the potential to create barriers and exclude people from participation because they may be assessed as lacking the skills, time flexibility or experience for the volunteer job. In a formal setting, only selected people (volunteers) get the job (provided with access)

Unlocking the potential

- Need to start early – volunteer support services should be funded to support the introduction the importance of citizenship and mutual care with young people in school settings.
- Contribute to the social prescribing infrastructure – focusing on finding 'the right activities' to meet the needs of potential participants. The RACGP report stresses the need to facilitate engagement rather than simply suggesting or signposting to a program – people are likely to feel anxious about engaging without support (RACGP, 2019, p.5). The findings of this research illustrate the potential for the volunteer sector to contribute by enabling the sector to broaden its remit to participatory action.
- The social prescribing report suggests a wide range of activities are needed to reflect the range of causes of social isolation – bereavement, caring for others, poverty, sociocultural and geographical displacement (such as that of refugees and new immigrants), unstable housing, mental health issues, unemployment, age, transitioning through life stages (for example adolescence, having young children, retirement, old age) (RACGP, 2019).
- Build on existing mechanisms (for example, Neighbour Day – last Sunday in March; 2020 theme was social connection) (RACGP, 2019).
- Activities are co-designed with people based on their skills, needs and capabilities, giving people autonomy and control.
- Work with VIOs to ensure they have the right skills to work with individuals to design appropriate and meaningful activities. In the UK, it has been found that people with complex needs may need additional support to start participating in community activities (RACGP, 2019, p.3).
- Outreach activities to engage people who are vulnerable or isolated in participation opportunities.
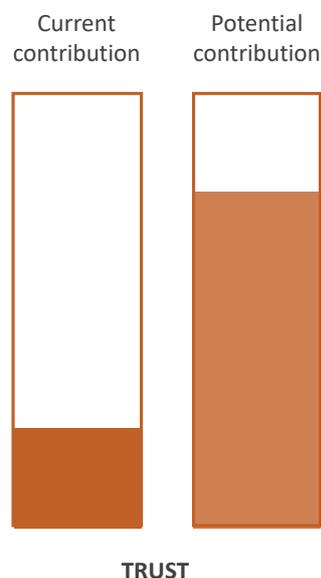
Trust in others

> People have a high level of trust in others

In the context of this research, this dimension is about trust between funders and volunteer organisations and trust between volunteer involving organisations and the network of community members as volunteers and potential volunteers.

Figure 27: Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'trust in others' dimension of social cohesion

Current contribution

Potential contribution

TRUST

Current contribution – why this rating?

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, community organisations that had untied funding had the greatest potential to pivot their

activities and address the immediate needs of their community. This trust in funding provides much-needed social capital to act.

- Experiences of colonisation and discrimination diminishes trust in others and organisations and preserves historical power dynamics. There needs to be greater awareness that the activity may re-enforce social hierarchies and power dynamics.

    'Activity based funding demonstrates a lack of trust in our organisation and community's ability to self-organise' – VRC representative

Unlocking the potential

- When done well, volunteering is an opportunity to get to know other people (who are different than you); this can build trust and respect.
- Adopting a strengths-based model rather than deficit model.

Acceptance of diversity

People accept individuals with other values and lifestyles as equals

This dimension is about understanding and acceptance across difference. As the rates of formal volunteer participation decline in Australia, VRCs are looking to find new ways to support VIOs through training, resources and tools to attract and gain community support and ensure their viability and success into the future.

Figure 28: Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'acceptance of diversity' dimension of social cohesion

    'VIOs have a negative perception of youth … they automatically go into risk mode when thinking about under 18 years.'

Current contribution   Potential contribution

DIVERSITY
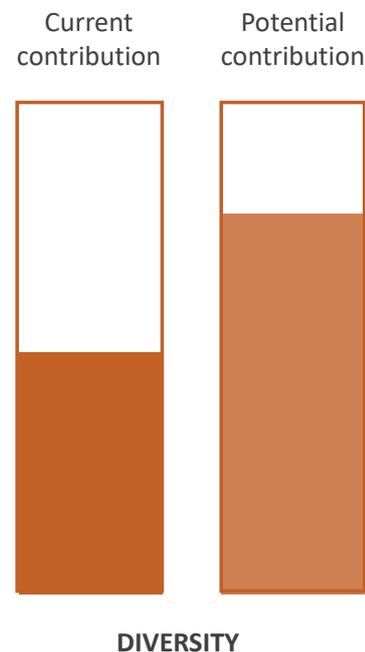
Current contribution – why this rating?

- One of the study sites specifically looked at developing a youth inclusion framework to better reach, engage and retain young people, who experience barriers to participation, in volunteering. VIOs' lack of acceptance of the needs of young people was cited as a barrier to their participation. There was a perception that if volunteers were not going to 'die on the job', then the VIO would not accept them.
- As previously identified, the recruitment, training and matching people into volunteer roles can create barriers to participation because they may be assessed as lacking the skills, time flexibility or experience for the volunteer job.

Unlocking the potential

- Co-design participation activities with people based on their skills, needs and capabilities, giving people autonomy and control.
- Allow community leadership and governance to play a critical role in ensuring organisations respond to the changing needs, interests and expectations of their community.

- Work with VIOs to ensure they have the right skills to work with individuals to design appropriate and meaningful activities. In the UK experience they found that people with complex needs may need additional support to start participating in community activities (RACGP, 2019, p.3).
- Provide outreach activities to engage people who are vulnerable or isolated and ensure navigation into opportunities is simple.
- Ensure opportunities create a sense of purpose, and enable the person to contribute and feel a sense of belonging (RACGP, 2019, p.4).
- Adopt a strengths-based mindset – seeing the potential of communities rather than deficits or limitations.

> 'An Australian community member who is well connected said some of the other Australian community members wouldn't come to (the facility) because it's for migrants.'

Example from the field: Horsham Table Tennis Association

The Horsham Table Tennis Association provides a place where anyone from the community can come together to play table tennis. It is a club for all ages and abilities. They specifically run an All Abilities program, providing access to people who are intellectually or physically challenged and Keen-Agers sessions to promote active and healthy lifestyles in partnership with the University of the Third Age. As a volunteer-run organisation, they have sought assistance from their VRC to strengthen the Association so that it can continue to create participation opportunities well into the future for all people in their community.

> 'The table tennis club enables people with and without disability to meaningfully connect to community members they normally wouldn't have any connections to'

5.4 Focus on the common good

This domain of social cohesion includes:

- Solidarity and helpfulness
- Civic participation
- Respect for social rules.

At the heart of the current VA definition of volunteering is 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain' so it is prudent that we focus on the three dimensions of the common good social cohesion domain.
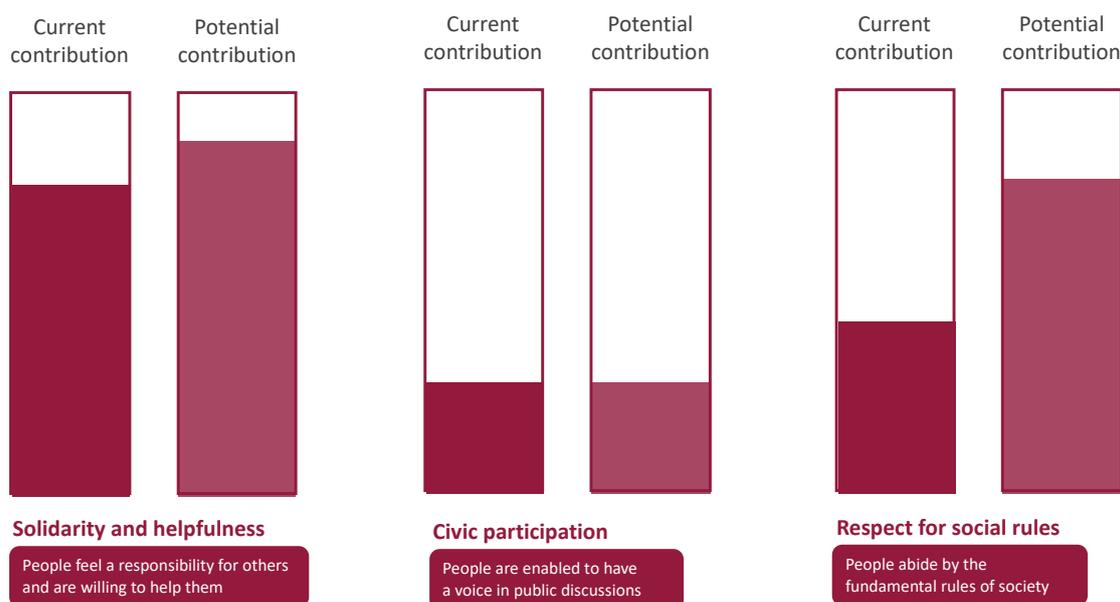

| Current contribution | Potential contribution | Current contribution | Potential contribution | Current contribution | Potential contribution |

Solidarity and helpfulness

People feel a responsibility for others and are willing to help them

Civic participation

People are enabled to have a voice in public discussions

Respect for social rules

People abide by the fundamental rules of society

Figure 29 Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the three dimensions of focus on the common good

Solidarity and helpfulness

People feel a responsibility for others and are willing to help them

As a sector that is funded to recruit, train and match community members to volunteer roles, in an effort to efficiently deliver this activity, it has evolved into an activity that can be at the exclusion of others.

Figure 30 Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'solidarity and helpfulness' dimension of social cohesion

| Current contribution | Potential contribution |

HELPFULNESS
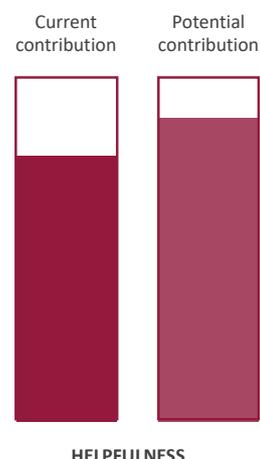
Volunteering Australia's 2016 'State of Volunteering' report highlights a dynamic that was expressed in many different ways throughout the research, that 'volunteering is about the job that needs to be done … it is not about the individual.' The report found that there is a mismatch between the volunteering roles and sectors that people are most interested to work, the roles that organisations are offering and the sectors with the most positions

advertised. Moreover, several respondents to the volunteer survey felt that volunteers were under-valued, and their roles were not designed strategically to accommodate for their skills and interests, especially relative to paid staff (VA, 2016).

Good times bring out the worst of people and bad times bring out the best

The disruption of COVID-19 has further highlighted the need to re-imagine and transition the volunteering sector into a participatory model. During COVID, there has been a 40 per cent reduction in formal volunteering activities and in its wake, informal community-led and hyper-local activities are filling the gaps.

Many VRCs and VIOs faced with restrictions on their current activities have transitioned their activities to all kinds of participatory action to overcome isolation and facilitate practical connections and social support. Examples include promoting and encouraging random acts of kindness towards neighbours and writing letters and postcard drops.

Figure 31: Postcard drops – a community-initiated activity of support

Current contribution – why this rating?

- Volunteering is an act of mutual support but creating conditions in the community for spontaneous helpfulness is not a role the VRCs traditionally play.
- The formality of volunteering can present barriers to people participating.
- If the volunteer program is good people will stay. Who supports the small local volunteer community organisations to ensure they are providing safe, meaningful and inclusive opportunities?
- Based around helping those 'in need' takes a deficit rather than a strength-based approach.

    'I understand about volunteering, what volunteers do but I don't understand how to enrol in volunteering here outside of my community.' Community quote

Unlocking the potential

- It is often said that 'good times bring out the worst of people and bad times bring out the best'. This aphorism is evident when disasters such as the floods or bushfires occur, but the ability for a community to harness and utilise this goodwill is often hampered by the absence of infrastructure or plans. This potential can be unlocked by recognising the role of the network of volunteer resource centres as the primary mechanism of spontaneous volunteer management.
- Develop a community engagement plan to promote the role of volunteer resource centres in managing spontaneous volunteers and to target recruitment, communication with and recognition of spontaneous volunteers in local communities.
- Volunteer support services could play a role in promoting and nurturing the value of community solidarity and provide tools and resources to enable it.

Civic participation

People are enabled to have a voice in public discussions

This dimension is about having safe and inclusive conditions for all people to have a voice and participate in constructive conversations ranging from local through to national and international issues.

It also addresses the fundamental aspects of participation such as voting and representation in local institutions. Supporting a diversity of views to have constructive conversations is important for a healthy democracy and cohesive society.
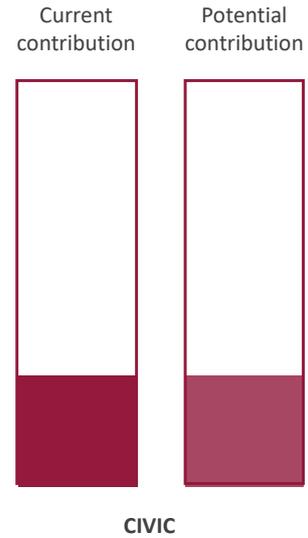
Figure 32: Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'civic participation' dimension of social cohesion

CIVIC

Current contribution – why this rating?

- Community leadership and governance plays a critical role in ensuring organisations respond to the changing needs, interests and expectations of their community. This is a chicken and egg scenario, where well-functioning community organisations and public institutions play a role in enabling people to have a voice.

Unlocking the potential

- Work with schools to promote participation and active citizenship. One might ask, who is the voice of mutual care and helpfulness in our community today?
- Provide community infrastructure and resources to ensure all people have a voice .
- Support community determined activities for communities to have agency over the activities and where underrepresented communities have a place where they 'belong'.

    'Volunteering is undervalued pathway to a lot of things in community. The government can't do half of the things without the number of volunteers now.'

Respect for social rules

People abide by the fundamental rules of society

Current contribution   Potential contribution

Participatory action provides opportunities for people with diverse backgrounds to come together, to learn new skills, language and social norms. This experience of learning social norms through volunteering was sighted in other research reports and expressed by volunteers through engagement. And across many of the research sites, volunteer involving programs have been funded to engage vulnerable and isolated people, particularly CALD communities, to help them to integrate into their new communities.

SOCIAL RULES
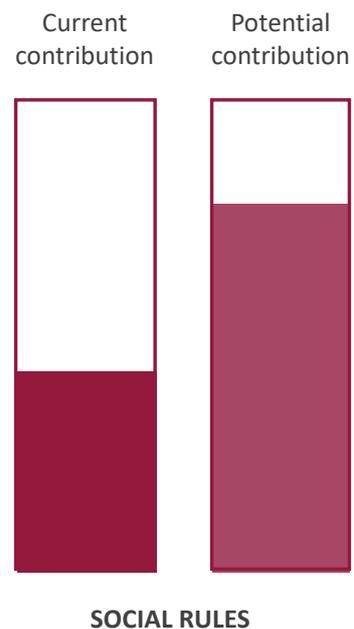
'Before the library was an alienated place … we thought we could not go in … now we feel we can go anytime' – Coffee and Card participant through a translator

Figure 33: Illustration of the current and potential contribution of volunteering to the 'respect for social rules' dimension of social cohesion

Current contribution – why this rating?

- As previously identified, the recruiting, training and matching people into volunteer roles can create barriers to participation because they may be assessed as lacking the skills, time flexibility or experience for the volunteer job.
- Research of volunteer engagement suggests navigating into the volunteer 'system' can be complex and daunting, particularly when it is outside of their community.

Unlocking the potential

    Provide help with service and system navigation and access (RACGP, 2019).
- Provide greater acknowledgement and support to the volunteer sector to expand their role in promoting and enabling opportunities for participation from random acts of kindness for formal volunteering and their importance for connections
- Co-design participatory activity around the individual.

Example from the field: Help Your Neighbour – Bendigo

The Bendigo Volunteer Resource Centre (BVRC) based in regional Victoria provides volunteer resource services across the Greater Bendigo region. As the COVID-19 restrictions have continued, the BVRC has pivoted their activities, recognising the critical role they can play in promoting social participation and maintaining social relations. *Help Your Neighbour* is a community campaign to encourage Central Victorians to come together and help their neighbours with simple acts of kindness in the face of COVID-19.

6. Supporting Australian Government policy goals

6.1 The question of constitutional validity of federal government funding of volunteer management capability

This study has found that volunteer engagement has the potential to contribute to social cohesion. This contribution can be substantially enhanced if the remit of Volunteer Resource Centres expands to a fuller support of all Participatory Action Dimensions. This is a path to stronger social cohesion.

Social cohesion can be understood as a **social policy goal**. Social cohesion contributes to strong and resilient communities, which require less support, are less dependent on welfare, and are less prone to challenges of crime, substance misuse, violence, unemployment, cultural intolerance and conflict.

Strong and resilient communities are also better able to respond to and recover from natural disasters and other emergencies – recent bushfires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic provide a stark demonstration.

This means that a number of cross-cutting policy responses are important for safeguarding and building social cohesion. In examining the social cohesion policy context, social cohesion can be understood to contribute to (at least) four key federal policy areas:

- Community wellbeing and economic development
- National unity in cultural diversity and integration
- Disaster resilience and emergency management
- Reconciliation.

In each of these policy areas, social cohesion and volunteering are explicitly mentioned as contributing to the policy goals. The following sections summaries the relevant policies in each of these four areas.
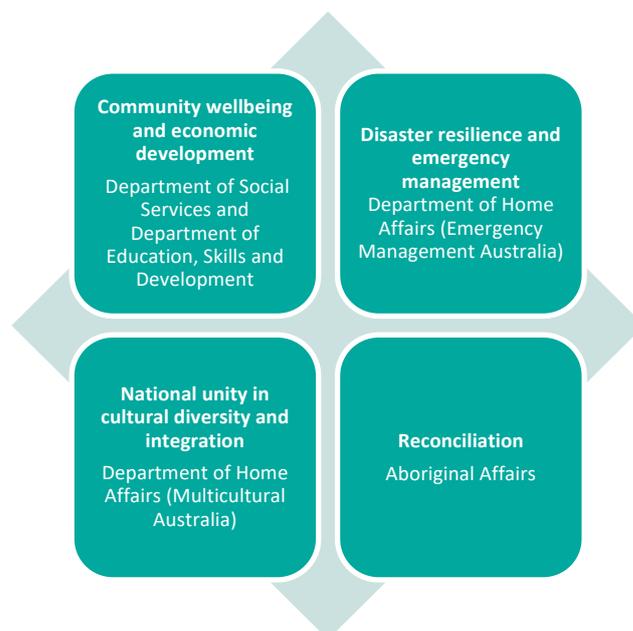

Community wellbeing and economic development
Department of Social Services and Department of Education, Skills and Development

Disaster resilience and emergency management
Department of Home Affairs (Emergency Management Australia)

National unity in cultural diversity and integration
Department of Home Affairs (Multicultural Australia)

Reconciliation
Aboriginal Affairs

Figure 34: Policy areas most relevant to social cohesion

6.2   **Community wellbeing and economic development –** Department of Social Services and Department of Education, Skills and Development

The Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) is responsible for improving the wellbeing of individuals and families. DSS has a broad remit, with responsibilities for communities, vulnerable people, people with disabilities, carers, families and children, housing, mental health, seniors, women's safety, working age and welfare reform. This research was supported through the DSS, Families and Communities – Strengthening Communities Programme.

> *Mental health, family violence, unemployment, housing stability and other symptoms of a lack of cohesion are all increasingly under pressure.*

We have seen time and again what happens to social cohesion when communities experience hardship and structural transition. Regional communities have struggled to deal with changing demographic and socio-economic profiles. Regions like Gippsland, North Adelaide and the Hunter Valley have struggled to deal with industry transition. Cities have struggled to deal with soaring housing costs. And just about everyone has struggled to deal with the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mental health, family violence, unemployment, housing stability and other symptoms of a lack of cohesion are all increasingly under pressure.

> *More cohesive communities are also showing themselves to be better able to deal with shocks.*

Yet there is a flip side to all this. More cohesive communities are also showing themselves to be better able to deal with shocks. While formal volunteering is estimated to have dropped by 40 per cent during the COVID-19 pandemic, some communities are finding ways to be mutually supportive. People with strong natural supports are less likely to experience isolation. More cohesive communities demonstrate solidarity, willingness to help and concern for the common good. Communities with access to infrastructure to be mutually supportive are using it (lockdown restrictions notwithstanding).

When individuals and communities experience hardships and long-term vulnerabilities and inequity, it diminishes their capacity to respond to external disasters and crisis and is ultimately costly to government. Further, communities with the access to the right resources and community infrastructure are better able to respond to crises.

Work for the Dole (WfD)

Work for the Dole (WfD) is a federal government program that operates as a form of 'work-based' welfare. As part of this program, welfare recipients (including single parents, people designated as having 'partial work capacity' and people over 50) can undertake voluntary activity to satisfy the 'mutual obligation requirements' necessary to receive government support. Politically, WfD receives bipartisan support. Current understandings of the efficacy of WfD is measured via the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) Work for the Dole Skills and Satisfaction survey, which captures the amount of time taken to transition into employment, as well as some responses around 'job readiness'.

In 2018–19, 76.7 per cent of participants reported an increased desire to find a job, which exceeds the 75 per cent target for 2018–19. A majority of participants also reported an improvement in their ability to work with others, self-confidence, and work-related skills (DESE, 2019). In contrast to these findings, another smaller scale survey conducted by the Australian Council for Social Service (2018) found that WfD was widely regarded as a waste of time since the 'work' had little or no connection with paid employment or employment related skills. The WfD Skills and Satisfaction survey does not include

indicators relating to social, emotional or health outcomes. This is particularly pertinent following the release of the 'I Want to Work' report (2018) and the Australian Labour Party's subsequent pre-election announcement in 2019 of an intended re-structure to WfD and JobActive programs due to high cost – $6 billion annually – and increasing evidence regarding its inefficacy.

As part of this project, Think Impact conducted a range of stakeholder interviews with sector representatives, as well as exploring 'volunteering as a pathway to employment' through our fieldwork in the Hunter Valley with the Hunter Resource Centre. The WfD program is directing individuals into volunteer activities that may not otherwise undertake this activity. We wanted to understand how the volunteer sector is responding to these volunteers, what happens for the individual undertaking voluntary activity, and how this activity might contribute to greater social cohesion.

Some of the positive outcomes are summarised below:

> 'Some host organisations are great civil agents – they really care for the individuals. There is value also in WfD mitigating social isolation, not just whether there is an employment outcome' – National peak body for NFP employment services representative

Even if the motivation to come to volunteering is through a mutual obligation, organisations still have the capacity to make people feel they have something to offer and that they can pick and choose the nature of their volunteer activity. Sector representatives emphasise the importance of taking a strengths-based approach to engaging with volunteers who have come via a mutual obligation pathway.

> 'We see it face to face. We see an attitudinal change in the person who has come in for a reason that is not necessarily their own choosing but it's almost like a lightbulb moment and they think "right I have something to contribute and I'm going to do it"' – Volunteer peak body representative

Some of the key challenges in this area include:

- Turning volunteering into a means rather than a means to an end – that is, volunteering as a pathway to employment – diminishes the transformational opportunities of volunteering activity, as well as the sense of participation in broader community and something bigger than yourself.
- The stigma attached to mutual obligation volunteers versus 'traditional' volunteers. By not necessarily coming of their own free will, some volunteer managers and VIOs are reporting that WfD volunteers are not getting treated with the same amount of time, respect or interest.

> '[Mandated volunteering] is a bit problematic – we are supportive that it has been included as a recommended activity, but it takes away the "free will" element and it contradicts the definition of volunteering.' – Volunteer peak body representative

> 'The only job a JobActive provider ever got was their own' – a somewhat tongue-in-cheek view from an industry leader

6.3 National unity in cultural diversity and integration – Department of Home Affairs

The Australian Government Department of Home Affairs was created in December 2017 with responsibilities including immigration, multicultural affairs, emergency management, national security, countering violent extremism and terrorism.

Multicultural affairs in Australia is based on '**integration and social cohesion** … where Australians come together and embrace multicultural diversity and help all communities become actively part of and benefit from Australia's economic and social development' (Multicultural Affairs).

Australia's policy history, however, has not always been inclusive, with the White Australia Policy, which excluded non-European immigration, active until 1973. It is acknowledged that many people, especially those who did not speak English as their first language, experienced hardships including overt racism when they migrated to Australia.

To support 'national unity in cultural diversity' and integration, Multicultural Affairs has produced the *Australian Government's Multicultural Statement: United, Strong, Successful* which provides a public statement about Australia's shared values and rights and responsibilities for all Australians.

It articulates **Respect, Equality and Freedom** as our shared values.

'Shared Australian values are the cornerstone of our economic prosperity as well as our socially cohesive society' – Australia's Multicultural Statement: United, Strong, Successful

Multicultural Affairs is also guided by the Multicultural Access and Equity Policy which aims to 'harness the economic and social benefits of our diversity and build a more productive and socially cohesive Australia for all of us' by ensuring Australian Government programs and services meet the needs of all Australians, regardless of a person's cultural and linguistic background.

The Multicultural Access and Equity Policy centres around six commitments (leadership, engagement, performance, capability, responsiveness and openness) to ensure the effective delivery of government programs and services in a multicultural society. The overriding goal is 'to ensure that departments and agencies take primary responsibility for identifying, understanding and responding to the needs of their clients … and more broadly … build a more productive and socially cohesive Australia for all of us'.

Refugee and humanitarian considerations

Community infrastructure that enables and promotes diverse participation contributes substantially to social cohesion. In the Refugee Council of Australia's 2010 report, *Economic, civic and social contributions of refugees and humanitarian entrants* the Council observes the definition of volunteering in Australia can result in research failing to recognise the full extent of contributions by people from CALD backgrounds. The natural inclination for self-help observed across CALD communities throughout Australia is likely to represent a significant, yet undervalued and under-recognised contribution to reduced reliance on government support services. The definition of volunteering in Australia tends to reinforce and inequitable power dynamic of a 'volunteer' and 'those volunteered to'.

The natural inclination for self-help observed across CALD communities throughout Australia is likely to represent a significant, yet undervalued and under-recognised contribution to reduced reliance on government support services

'There have been a number of violent incidents in Australia, which have been motivated by extreme racial and religious views, and which undermine the cohesive fabric of our communities.'

6.4 Disaster resilience and emergency management – Department of Home Affairs (Emergency Management Australia)

During the 2019/2020 summer season, Australia experienced its most devastating bushfires and then the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This has come in the wake of devastating floods in NSW and Queensland and many other disasters and emergencies. In recognising the importance of

volunteering in this context alone, how are we investing in the community infrastructure which builds social cohesion and enables communities to be more resilient?

The Department of Home Affairs is responsible for emergency or disaster preparedness, management and recovery through the Emergency Management Australia division. Emergency Management Australia delivers programs, policies and services that strengthen Australia's national security and emergency management capability and is guided by the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience. The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience was published in February 2011 after the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to 'adopt a whole-of-nation resilience based approach to disaster management' centring on achieving community and organisational resilience and acknowledges that is a 'shared responsibility for individuals, households, businesses and communities, as well as governments' (COAG, 2011).

The strategy includes seven action areas:

1. Leading change and coordinating effort

2. Understanding risks

3. Communicating with and educating people about risks

4. Partnering with those who effect change

5. Empowering individuals and communities to exercise choice and take responsibility

6. Reducing risks in the built environment

7. Supporting capabilities for disaster resilience

… the strategy centres the importance of community and organisational resilience in dealing with disasters

Of most relevance is the recognition that community vulnerability limits a community's ability to prepare, respond and recover. And further, the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience centres the importance of community and organisational resilience in dealing with disasters. In particular the following action areas specifically reference the role of volunteers:

3. Communicating with and educating people about risks – Communities need to be supported through appropriately targeted training and awareness activities, including those that highlight the roles of spontaneous volunteers to enhance local capacity to mitigate and cope with disasters. This is a role for VRCs.

5. Empowering individuals and communities to exercise choice and take responsibility – Communities need programs and activities in schools and the broader community actively supporting the cohesion dimension of focusing on the common good and in particular solidarity and helping others. This is also a role for VRCs.

7. Supporting capabilities for disaster resilience – Decision makers adopt policies and practices that support and recognise emergency services and the importance of people participating in disaster response activities in our communities. This is also a role for VRCs.

To deliver the federal government's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience requires a strong framework for engaging and managing 'spontaneous volunteers'. Such a framework was developed in the wake of the 2017 Lismore floods by Northern Rivers Community Gateway. Their *Managing Spontaneous Volunteers Project* recognised the shift away from traditional, long-term, high-commitment forms of volunteering and the shift towards more episodic and spontaneous forms.

The study identified the importance of an 'enabling' rather than 'procedural' approach to managing spontaneous volunteering as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Procedural and enabling approaches to spontaneous volunteer management

Procedural approach	Enabling approach
• Problems solved through command and control • Volunteers brought into traditional management structures • Plans are detailed, lengthy and rigid	• Problems solved through existing social structures • Decentralised decision making and improvisation, agile and outcome focused • Guidelines not prescriptions, focus on communications, relationships, preparation and training

The *Managing Spontaneous Volunteers Project* makes several recommendations relevant to this study including:

- Recognise the role of the network of volunteer resource centres as the primary mechanism of spontaneous volunteer management in NSW
- Develop a community engagement plan to promote the role of volunteer resource centres in managing spontaneous volunteers and to target recruitment, communication with and recognition of spontaneous volunteers in local communities
- Provide funding to volunteer resource centres to effectively deliver spontaneous volunteer management relating to recruitment, training, support and activation
- Provide funding for a coordinating agency to facilitate a network of volunteer resource centres specifically in relation to improving spontaneous volunteer management arrangements across NSW, either through Volunteering NSW or a nominated lead volunteer resource centre.

'We need to focus more on action-based resilience planning to strengthen local capacity and capability, with greater emphasis on community engagement and better understanding of the diversity, needs, strengths and vulnerabilities within communities' – Managing Spontaneous Volunteers Project

6.5 Reconciliation – National Indigenous Australians Agency

The Executive Order to establish the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) as an Executive Agency on 1 July 2019 names one of the functions to 'lead Commonwealth activities to promote reconciliation'.

The NIAA supports the Prime Minister and the Minister for Indigenous Australians, The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP to achieve the Australian Government objective to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians 'by leading the development of the Commonwealth's approach, focusing on place, working in partnership, and effectively delivering programs through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 6).

The Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), introduced in 2014 and now administered by the NIAA, provides federal government funding and delivery of a range of programs for Indigenous Australians, consolidating 27 programs into the following five overarching areas:

- Jobs, Land and Economy
- Children and Schooling
- Safety and Wellbeing
- Culture and Capability
- Remote Australia Strategies

*Employment, economic development and **social participation** improve the lives of families and communities.*

Among the three key focus areas for the NIAA is:

- Employment, economic development and **social participation** improve the lives of families and communities. The right **conditions** and incentives need to be in place for Indigenous Australians to participate in the economy and broader society (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

At this point, it's important to make a distinction between participation in the sense of public participation or community consultation, and social participation as something that builds social cohesion – both within and beyond Indigenous communities. To do this, we must also acknowledge the historical and continuing practice and negative impact of engaging community members as volunteers.

The increasing focus on shared local decision making is beginning to mark a shift in these damaging dynamics – towards empowering communities to make and account for the decisions that affect them.

Following findings from the Australian National Audit Office that identified insufficient evaluation of the IAS, the establishment of the NIAA as a separate agency has been regarded as a potential step towards establishing shared ownership and responsibility for community outcomes.

'We will take responsibility for outcomes in a way that the public service does not.'

– Pat Turner, Lead Convener of the Coalition of Peaks, CEO of NACCHO and Co-Chair of the Joint Council on Closing the Gap

In March 2019, a formal Partnership Agreement between the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations came into effect. Among the partnership agreements are a Joint Council on Closing the Gap – the first COAG Council to include non-government representation.

In establishing a framework to measure its performance, the NIAA names 'enhancing regional governance and local decision-making' among its activities, with the following intended results:

- Develop a national framework for local and regional decision making and governance and establish additional Empowered Communities or other regional model sites.
- Participate in state and territory local decision-making processes.
- Improved partnerships with communities through place-based practice (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 11).

The performance measures, methodology, and annual targets relating to these results, however, speak to increasing the participation and presence of the NIAA – for example, through their 'permanent presence of regional offices' and through formal participation in local decision making processes – rather than direct support and opportunities for Indigenous peoples to participate (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, pp. 8–10).

To deliver its intended results and on the federal government objective to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians, the NIAA must strengthen the framework that it uses to measure and respond to its impact on Indigenous communities. To do this, performance measures must move beyond quantifying NIAA's activities to an understanding of the implications of these activities for people's lives. As part of this, there is a need for federal government support of community infrastructure to support local participation and to begin to establish more trusting, mutually beneficial relationships within and beyond communities.

Case studies

The project included fieldwork and collaboration with five Volunteer Resources Centres (VRCs) across Australia. These sites, part of the National Network of Volunteer Resource Centres (NNVRC), were chosen for their diversity of contexts, demographics and geographies. They represent organisations in metro, regional and rural areas grappling with challenges relating to migration, community infrastructure, workforce transitions and unemployment.

The following provides an overview of these sites, including:

- key regional data
- research focus
- challenges and learnings unique to each site.

Albury-Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau – *Cards and Coffee* program

Albury-Wodonga is separated geographically by the Murray River and politically by a state border: Albury on the north of the river in New South Wales and Wodonga on the south in Victoria. The region has a long history of being a resettlement hub for refugees and migrants. In 1947 a camp was established at nearby Bonegilla to be the first home for refugees who came to Australia after the Second World War. Albury's Indigenous and pioneering populations have blended with post-WWII migrant communities – German, Dutch, Italian, Greek, Filipino and Polish – and more recently arrived Vietnamese, Laotian, Albanian, Bosnian and Bhutanese communities (DSS, 2015).

Social cohesion through deeper engagement with refugee communities

This research site focuses on the *Cards and Coffee* program of Albury-Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau, which aims to improve accessibility for people with migrant or refugee backgrounds to participate in Australian society by breaking down cultural barriers. Over 1,000 Bhutanese refugees were resettled in Albury between 2009 and 2015 (SBS, 2015).

The *Cards and Coffee* program commenced in 2018 to address the needs of new communities settling in the area. The program is supported by a network of community volunteers who transport 22 older individuals with a Bhutanese background every week to the Albury or Lavington library to socialise, play

cards (mostly the men) or colour-in printed pictures (mostly the women). Some also use picture cards to learn basic English.

The participants clearly value and appreciate the program and for many it seems to be their main point of social contact.

The participants live spread out in Albury, Wodonga and Lavington, and report it is not easy for them to come together. The program has given them the opportunity to socialise and minimise social isolation.

Before the program, many reported they would stay at home watching TV without being able to understand what was being said. They also went to shopping centres, community centres and parks to kill time. Given that participants cannot drive, and those who have family members reported them to be often too busy with their own lives, isolation, depression and loneliness were key challenges. They can't communicate with neighbours and live too far from the other participants.

The key focus of this site was to study the **Cards and Coffee** program and evolve it into empowering the Bhutanese community to participate in the broader community in a way that could be more meaningful for the participants.

Findings

The program consists of older Bhutanese people, some of whom have been in Australia for up to nine years. Many have experienced the trauma of refugee camps. Since coming Albury-Wodonga they have experienced both positive experiences and challenges. The main challenge is the language barrier. Some have attended TAFE for up to four years, but due to their age and often limited educational background they have struggled learning English. Furthermore, many participants feel isolated and lonely at home, especially given their lack of mobility.

Table 3: Positive and negative experiences reported

Positive	Negative/Challenges
Medical care in Australia (they have received the health treatments required) **Feeling supported by the government (for example receiving pension)** ***Cards and Coffee* program has been good for socialising**	Language barrier (linked with not being able to drive) No family to provide support – therefore relying on community which is hard because of the language barrier. Not knowing how to use technology ('everything was simple in Bhutan!' Even an electric oven represents a challenge for many.)

When interviewed (with the help of an interpreter) the women indicated that they do not dislike their colouring activities – but they have become monotonous. They said that if their artwork were for a **purpose** (for example, for a display), or if it were something more **collaborative** (such as larger group pieces), they would be experience higher satisfaction levels.

The men acknowledged their rural past and indicated they miss their farming culture and would like to be able to see farms, rice paddies and Australian wildlife.

Both the men and the women indicated they would like to have more support to learn English. Participants were very grateful for this program and stated many times that they would like the program to continue and even increase in frequency. However, on deeper engagement with the participants it became clear that the evolution of the services offered is hampered by restrictions associated with the program's funding model. Notably, the bus can only work in a radius of 100km due to OH&S limitations and staff and resources are limited.

What could be done differently?

The program aims to generate cultural exchange but there is currently very limited exchange of cultures due to the limitations of the funding and the strong formal volunteering focus. The following suggestions arose during this research:

- Develop a community garden in lieu of a visit to farms
- Produce a publication with Bhutanese hobbies and recipes – this would create greater engagement with the wider community and provide other community members a better understanding of the Bhutanese culture
- Conduct an exhibition of objects and photos. Participants reported the informal placement of their photos on the wall helped provide a sense of belonging: 'My photo is there so I belong!'
- Do some food sharing, visit gardens or go on picnics
- Go on an excursion, look around and get more familiar with the district
- Start a choir
- Share refugee experiences.

Due to the COVID-19 social distancing measures this program is currently paused.

Implications of the findings

This program represents something of a double-edged sword. It demonstrates both the power of volunteers to improve the lives of

vulnerable people and also the limitations of a traditional model of formal volunteering.

This program represents something of a double-edged sword. It demonstrates both the power of volunteers to improve the lives of vulnerable people and the limitations of a traditional model of formal volunteering in which the program is defined by the participation of the volunteers and the designated activity for the participants.

The volunteers do a wonderful job and give their time to provide transport from the participant's homes to the *Cards and Coffee* sessions. They stay on and support the participants in many ways.

Whilst this model provides important and valuable services to the Bhutanese community members it also underlines limitations of looking at volunteering in terms of the 'volunteers' and 'volunteered to'. One wonders what might be possible if more of the decision-making around resourcing was placed in the participants' hands. This program demonstrates how the current funding structures narrows the options available to VIOs and VRCs in term of taking a transformational approach that is adaptive and responsive to participants' needs, interests and desires.

In summary

How could this program be different if viewed though a 'participation lens' rather than a 'volunteering lens'?

Volunteering lens	Participation lens
• Clear distinction between 'volunteers' and those 'volunteered to' • Program is defined by the activities (cards and colouring) • Community consultations are not continuous	• Co-design approach: Bhutanese community members' views and desires are drivers of activities • Funding allows for flexibility and adaptation of activities • Continuous conversations with community members and responsive consultation. Community needs are changing, and programs should evolve accordingly

Centre for Participation – Building capacity in VIOs

The Wimmera is a region located in the north-west of Victoria and includes five Local Government Areas: Horsham Rural City, Northern Grampians, Yarriambiack, Hindmarsh and West Wimmera. The region is renown as a strong grain-growing area and features a diverse population. The Wimmera is characterised by:

• Youth unemployment in the region is the fourth highest in Victoria.
• All regions also have equal or higher than the Victorian average (4 per cent) of people receiving unemployment benefits for longer than 6 months.
• In all regions within the Wimmera, the percentage of the population living on the disability support pension (8–15 per cent) is significantly higher than the Victorian average (5 per cent) (ABS, 2016).
• The region presents a much higher rate of people aged 15 years who did voluntary work through an organisation or group (32–45 per cent) than the Victorian and Australian average (19 per cent) (ABS, 2016).

The area has become an increasingly popular destination for immigrants to resettle and has seen a 25 per cent increase in the number of immigrants choosing to become Australian citizens (Foresight Lane, 2015). Nevertheless, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups form on average 8.6 per cent of the total regional population compared to 24.3 per cent at the state level (Wong, et al. 2014). The region presents a much higher rate of people aged 15 years who did voluntary work through an organisation or group (32–45 per cent) than the Victorian and Australian average (19 per cent) (ABS, 2016).

Social cohesion through strong community organisations

The focus at this site is on building internal capacity of VIOs. The Centre for Participation provides a wide range of support services to community organisations to build their leadership and governance capability.

For this study the focus was on St. Arnaud Community Resource Centre, Horsham Table Tennis Association, Horsham Agricultural Society and role that VRCs such as the Centre for Participation play in capacity-building.

St. Arnaud Community Resource Centre assists the region to access digital services, serves as a Centrelink agent, provides pre-accredited education and a food bank. It is focused on community development and place-based delivery. The organisation is located in St Arnaud, a small town approximately 100km east of Horsham, with a declining population of approximately 2,000 people. The community resource centre strives to enhance the lives of their community members by offering a variety of services and resources.

Horsham Table Tennis Association provides a welcoming and inclusive place where people of all ages and abilities can participate in table tennis. The club hosts a senior competition, junior competition, Keen-Agers social table tennis for older persons and an Access for All Abilities program.

Horsham Agricultural Society is a 143-year-old organisation that organises the annual Horsham Agricultural Show. The Show provides competitions and free entertainment for the community and gives local businesses the opportunity to showcase new products.

Each of these organisations are very different, but they share a role in the creation of social cohesion. The Centre for Participation works directly with the three organisations to support their needs and to enable greater success, focusing on their contribution to social cohesion, and strengthening the leadership and governance of those organisations.

The key focus of this site was to examine how VRCs such as the Centre for Participation could be involved in systematically and sustainably building VIOs' capabilities.

Findings

The three VIOs in question had a set of challenges which included:

- **Managing forced transition to survive** from long-established organisations with deep traditions and expectations to being inclusive of new groups.
- **How to use co-design** to evolve their organisations in response to their community's wants and needs.
- **How to be impact-led** organisations that are also able to communicate impact to funders to attract support.
- **How to foster opportunities** for all community members to participate, either as volunteers or in other ways.

> *For the Centre for Participation the challenge was to find ways to support these community organisations, to enable greater participation in their communities and be more successful and efficient in their work*

Small community organisations are often at the heart of the communities they serve. However, to be able to continue building opportunities for their communities to participate, they frequently require external support. For the Centre for Participation the challenge was to find ways to support these community organisations, to enable greater participation in their communities and be more successful and efficient in their work. They achieved this by providing tools, resources and both formal and informal support to help these groups to achieve greater success and overcome the challenges they faced.

Central to Centre for Participation's work with the VIOs was to bring a broader participative lens to each organisation.

St Arnaud Community Resource Centre has been able to enhance their governance and leadership capability and are better able to articulate their impact and respond to community need.

Horsham Agricultural Society are successfully tapping into new markets and finding new ways to open opportunities for people to participate through the use of their physical infrastructure.

Horsham Table Tennis Association now proudly recognise the value of their organisation in building participation for diverse members of the local population. As one of the organisation's leaders described it:

> '… we are a social inclusion organisation masquerading as a table tennis club!'

Organisations have also expressed the need for support mainly in the areas of grant writing and implementing the principles of co-design.

> 'People who are giving the grants are not on the ground and don't know how to communicate things so that organisations understand how to apply for the grant … You must use the right catchphrase to get the grant.' VIO leader

The move to a participative approach has resulted in a greater uptake of co-design principles and in stronger, more effective organisations as outlined in the following table.

Table 4: Organisations commitments to co-design principles

Co-design principles	Contribution to participation lens
Inclusive	Creating a place that is more accessible to diverse community members has resulted in greater community participation and improved financial sustainability.
Respectful	Respecting people for their diverse ability rather than disability has created opportunities to participate and be included.
Participative	Allowing a broader range of voices to be heard has resulted in organisations that thrive from being responsive to community needs.
Iterative	Ongoing dialogue from a participative community builds the capability for organisations to be adaptive to community needs as they change.
Impact focused	Taking an impact-led approach to program design and measuring impact enables more effective programs and greater ability to articulate impact.

All three organisations exhibit ways in which they are contributing to the domains of social cohesion. Being rooted in the community, the organisations have open-door policies that provide access to community members and enable them to act as a place where community members can connect. This is apparent in the Horsham Table Tennis Association's focus on being accessible to people with all abilities; in the inclusive service provision at the St. Arnaud Community Resource Centre, and in and Horsham Agricultural Society's change of strategy including the election of their youngest president, aged 21, which has opened new market opportunities and more opportunities for people to utilise the facility for participatory activity.

Implications of the findings

The findings suggest that VIOs are willing to move to a more participation-based model, but often lack capability and resources to make it a reality. VRCs can play a vital role in filling this capability gap. This demonstrates a continued need for funding VRCs in their key role of growing capacity of VIOs.

In summary

How could these organisations and other VIOs be supported through a 'participation lens' rather than a 'volunteering lens'?

Volunteering lens	Participation lens
• Enhance leadership capacity for volunteer engagement • Support organisations to increase volunteer engagement • Focus effort on recruiting volunteers for leadership and operational roles rather than participants for inclusion.	• Enhance leadership for broad participation-building • Build organisation's impact literacy • Support community organisations to use co-design principles • Support organisations to increase community participation and community ownership

Hunter Volunteer Centre – Mutual obligations and volunteering as a pathway to employment

The Hunter Valley is located north of Sydney in New South Wales and includes eleven Local Government Areas: City of Lake Macquarie, City of Newcastle, City of Maitland, City of Cessnock, Port Stephens Council, Great Lakes Council, Singleton Council, Muswellbrook Shire, Upper Hunter Shire, Dungog Shire and Gloucester Shire.

The Hunter Valley is characterised by the following factors:

- The number of overseas born arrivals provides an idea of the inward migration of people from overseas. Between 2006 and 2011 there was a 71 per cent increase in the number of people born overseas to come and live in the Hunter Valley Region (Wong, 2014).
- Unemployment overall for the region is running at 7.2 per cent, compared to 6.3 per cent in New South Wales and 6.9 per cent in Australia (ABS, 2016).
- In Hunter Valley, of couple families with children, 23.9 per cent had both parents not working. This is higher than the New South Wales (21 per cent) and Australia averages (20.1 per cent) (ABS, 2016).

Social cohesion through pathways to employment

In this area, the aim of the research was to examine how the Hunter Volunteer Centre's program, Volunteer Pathway to Employment (VPTE) contributes to social cohesion. As a planned expansion to the established training component of VPTE, Hunter Volunteer Centre partnered with GPT Charlestown, a large shopping centre, to create volunteer opportunities within their Welcome Team program. Welcome Team volunteers help guests navigate the shopping centre. The VPTE program sought to provide an

opportunity for people with mutual obligation requirements who would like to be employed in retail and customer services to volunteer in a retail setting to gain skills valued by employers.

Mutual obligation programs such as Work for the Dole, in which unemployed people receiving activity tested income support payments are required to actively look for work or, in certain circumstances, engage in volunteering activity. The aim of mutual obligation programs is to get recipients work experience to help them re-engage with the labour market. Hunter Volunteer Centre works with job networks that assist welfare recipients on mutual obligation to gain work experience.

Findings

A part of this project was to organise a Volunteer Pathways to Employment workshop, that would bring local businesses, Registered Training Organisations, volunteers and job network providers together to co-design a person-centred approach to recruitment focusing on how to best support people to become engaged in volunteering or employment and designing roles to reflect individual needs. The VPTE program had to be cancelled due to lack of willingness of the job network providers to participate. This can partly be assigned to the current funding model that does not encourage a continued investment in jobseekers. Providers are largely funded on the basis of outcomes achieved for individual jobseekers, with payments varying according to the type and length of job placement.

A challenge experienced by the centre is that volunteers' expectations and interests are not fully responded to under the current policy settings.

Implications of findings

The current model, that views volunteering as a pathway to employment (and not a participation outcome in itself), is beneficial predominantly for organisations that are funded to produce outputs (the number of people placed) rather than outcomes (whether people have improved their employability). Pushing people into volunteer positions without adequate mentoring or support and who may have additional or complex needs, can have deleterious impacts on both the VIO, the beneficiary of the voluntary activity and the individual's experience of volunteering. Feedback indicates that current community organisations and VIOs are bearing costs associated with WfD without proper training, resources, financial backing or governance to properly manage volunteers with more complex backgrounds and needs.

In summary

How can mutual obligation programs be different if viewed through a 'participation lens' rather than a 'volunteering lens'?

Volunteering lens	Participation lens
• Individuals are placed in any type of volunteering position to meet their WfD requirements • The emphasis is on hours volunteered rather than the nature of the work	• Individuals' strengths and preferences are taken into account and positions as are much as possible tailored to these • For clients (especially those with more complex needs), any progress towards participation should be valued.

Northern Volunteering – Youth framework for the volunteer sector

Northern Volunteering is a VRC serving the City of Playford and the City of Salisbury, located in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia. The region has experienced significant industry transition and loss of major manufacturing industries in past decades, resulting in it being one of Australia's youth jobless hotspots.

This region is still one of the fastest growing local government areas in South Australia (Profile ID, 2017). However, despite the fast growth, the region is characterised by the following factors:

- The City of Playford's unemployment rate is 12.8 per cent, and City of Salisbury is 10 per cent, both significantly higher than Australia's average (6.9 cent) (ABS, 2016).
- The region presents low median weekly personal incomes. The median weekly personal income for people aged 15 years and over was $498, compared to $600 for South Australia and $662 for Australia (ABS, 2016).
- Northern Adelaide's youth unemployment rate is 18 per cent.(InDaily, 2018).
- 13 per cent of people aged 15 years and over did voluntary work through an organisation or group. This is much lower than the Australian average (19 per cent) (ABS, 2016).

As one of Australia's youth jobless hotspots there has been a closer look at volunteering as a way to build skills

Social cohesion through greater youth engagement

VIOs frequently report that it is difficult to reach, engage and retain young people. Meanwhile young people talk about struggling to find meaningful opportunities or support to be involved. This can manifest as a lack of confidence and the need to develop skills for work and life.

Northern Volunteering, in partnership with local government and other stakeholders, seeks to create a youth inclusion framework that addresses the negative stereotypes held by young people and organisations toward youth volunteering and participation. This research site looked at how youth engagement and participation can contribute to greater social cohesion

Findings

Northern Volunteering's *Reimaging Youth Volunteering* workshop was designed to inform a youth inclusion framework that would help VIOs to engage more young people in volunteering by making it easier for them. This session was attended by young people that were at the time, disengaged from education and employment.

> *… the lack of flexibility of organisations and the lack of guidance in finding and applying for opportunities hampers their (young people) ability to volunteer.*

The workshop succeeded in engaging the young people to talk about why volunteering matters, the benefits of volunteering and the barriers they face to participation. Many of the young people stated wanting to get into volunteering, but the lack of flexibility of organisations and the lack of guidance in finding and applying for opportunities hampers their ability to volunteer.

The session resulted in the production of a *Youth Inclusion Framework* which calls for the adaptation of the volunteer experience to be more youth friendly.

The framework identified many aspects of volunteering in its present form which act as barriers to youth participation. These included the need for flexibility, cultural responsibilities, family perceptions

of volunteering, costs (of travel for example), literacy and learning difficulties, mental health and confidence. A stronger emphasis on participation rather than volunteering is likely to result in younger people being able to engage in activities for the common good to a greater degree.

'In theory, there's a lot of young people at home because they have lost work … So I think it's about looking at how you tap into that, because these younger people are the ones who would probably turn more to the social media, grassroots type of mutual aid organisations.' – Professor Kirsten Holmes (Holmes, 2020)

Implications of the findings

Young people want to participate but they experience systematic and structural challenges to formal volunteering. However, there seems to be a lack of acceptance of diversity, a lack of trust in youth from VIOs and lack of trust in institutions from youth. By taking a participatory approach, VIOs and VRCs can work together combat this lack of acceptance of diversity and involve youth to build trust.

'Volunteer coordinators are always looking for older people with skills to contribute. When a less-skilled, young person walks through the door, the immediate reaction is to deem them unsuitable!' (VRC representative)

In summary

How could this experience be different if viewed through a 'participation lens' rather than a 'volunteering lens'?

Volunteering lens	Participation lens
- Looking for the 'stereotypically perfect' volunteer - Structured approach (set times) - Outreach via traditional media - High compliance cost - Young people disregarded as they lack skills	- Breaking down barriers and preconceptions of volunteer stereotypes - Youth's strength and preferences are taken into account and positions as are much a possible tailored - Flexible approach to participation - Design activities that young people want to engage in - Outreach via social media - Volunteering activities are developed on a win-win

Whittlesea Community Connections – Mernda Community House

The City of Whittlesea is located in Melbourne's north, about 20km from the Central Business District. It is one of the fastest growing municipalities in Australia. In the 2016/17 financial year, the City of Whittlesea was the fourth largest growing local government area in Victoria. Whittlesea is also characterised by the following factors:

- The city presents a lower family median weekly income ($1,569) compared to the Victorian ($1,715) and national average ($1,734) (ABS, 2016).
- The unemployment rate is 7.7 per cent, higher than the Australian average of 6.9 per cent (ABS, 2016).
- Almost half of all local residents (over 38,000 residents) speak a language other than English at home. Between late 2008 and mid-2013, a total of 11,048 new arrivals settled in the City of Whittlesea (City of Whittlesea, 2018). This multi-cultural quality continues to distinguish the region.

Social cohesion through community-led approaches to the development of a Neighbourhood House

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) is a place-based Volunteer Resource Centre that fosters relationships with the community in order to best understand their needs and provides an opportunity for the community to have a say about issues that matter to them. The organisation takes a strong community development approach in which they involve and engage deeply with community in all aspects of their programming. Setting up the Mernda Community House was no exception. In this region, this study examines how community-centred and community-led approaches can contribute to social cohesion.

Since its establishment in 2018, Mernda Community House has become a thriving hub of community activity and connection. The impact of COVID-19 has restricted physical attendance but the centre continues to deliver activities remotely.

Findings

The Mernda community has grown in a newly developed suburb experiencing a relative lack of places and opportunities to connect, share and learn from one another, particularly for isolated and vulnerable community members. In response, Mernda Community House has been created as a place where diversity and difference can co-exist and be valued and respected. The building in which the Mernda Community House is located is part of the NE Neighbourhood House network and was originally council-owned as a maternal health centre.

WCC decided early to work closely with the community to determine what the house should be and what activities should be run. Mernda Community House services a space in which community members have the power to make decisions around the activities and receive support from WCC to implement their ideas. Community members come together at the house and offer activities ranging from painting classes to Pilates, and gardening to wellbeing.

In taking this community-led approach, Mernda Community House is aiming to create an inclusive and supportive environment that facilitates participation based on community strength and capacity.

Implications of findings

This site acts a demonstrative case of successful implementation of participation approaches. The Mernda Community House is an example of a hyper-local community resource that empowers local community members to participate, share knowledge and provide mutual support without necessarily being recognised as volunteers. It offers the infrastructure and support to create a place that is for the community, by the community. A community-led approach is transformative as community members not only participate in activities being offered at Mernda Community House, but also in its decision-making process. This participative approach takes time and the right resources, people and assets to develop, in order to create a sense of belonging and build social cohesion.

In summary

How is this activity different as viewed through a 'participation lens' rather than a 'volunteering lens'?

Volunteering lens	Participation lens
- Agenda is set for the community and not by the community - Rigid structures and activities - Strong compliance emphasis	- Community-led: community infrastructure that is 'owned' by the community and services the community - Inclusive space for all community members - Community activities/engagement contribute to social cohesion - Strength based community development approach - Community infrastructure is prioritised over services

7.   Principles to guide volunteer support sector evolution

7.1   Principle 1: Broad participation is essential to social and economic recovery from COVID-19 and other major shocks

This year began with unprecedented bushfires, closely followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences have demonstrated three aspects of humanity – the *willingness of communities to participate in emergency response activities,* the *debilitating impact of social isolation* and the *resilience of communities when they find ways to participate* in activities in support of each other. These lessons cannot be forgotten – it is not just the efforts of a dedicated band of formal volunteers that is leading bushfire and COVID-19 recovery – it is a whole-of-community willingness to contribute to social and economic recovery. Given the expectation of increased frequency and severity of climate change shocks and the systemic vulnerability associated with inequity and isolation, strong, positive whole-of-community participation will be critical to the preparedness, response and recovery from future events.

7.2   Principle 2: Social cohesion is a valuable policy goal

Beyond COVID-19 recovery, social cohesion must be acknowledged as a valuable ongoing federal policy goal. Social cohesion contributes to a more inclusive economy – one where all people can positively contribute. The more people that are excluded from participating in the economy, the higher the costs of providing a social safety net.

As Australia continues to embrace multiculturalism, social cohesion is critical to the appreciation of cultural diversity. The acceptance of different lifestyles and cultures can become a national strength.

Resilience to disasters, emergencies and disruption is also positively impacted by social cohesion in the form of willingness and ability to participate in actions to prepare communities, mitigate immediate impacts and assist in recovery.

Reconciliation with First Nations peoples is also a federal policy goal and First Nations people provide a valuable perspective on participation; where supporting family and community is interwoven with kinship responsibilities and is a fundamental part of self-fulfilment, in stark contrast to an individualised Western understanding of 'helping' by volunteering.

7.3   Principle 3: Social cohesion needs meaningful investment

Strong social cohesion does not happen spontaneously. It can be nurtured, fostered and enabled by deliberate effort and the provision of accessible participation-building infrastructure. And the provision of participation-building infrastructure (for example, community-owned and controlled physical assets and facilities, relationships, skills, tools and resources) requires meaningful investment, to create long-term economic and social returns. At present, the federal government provides $18.8 million over three years to the volunteer sector under the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA). This is an average investment of approximately 25 cents per person per year in Australia. Strengthening social cohesion through participation will produce social value in communities that will drive economic savings for all levels of Government with the right support.

To understand the relative magnitude of investment, within the health system it costs on average **$634 per Emergency Department** (ED) presentation and **$5,390 per person per hospital stay** in Australia (IHPA, 2014). In the justice system it costs **$117,000** to keep someone in prison per year in Australia

(based on 2015 figures). The benefits of investing in regional participation infrastructure will enable local place-based community participation that will produce direct social and economic benefits.

These benefits could be in the form of reduced welfare through social enterprise development and job creation, greater employability through improved confidence and work skills, improved emotional and mental health and reduced isolation reducing the need for health services and avoided contacts with the justice system by providing outreach and opportunities to meaningfully participate and belong. However building participation requires meaningful investment to achieve social cohesion benefits.

7.4   Principle 4: Invest with 'bounded flexibility'

Funding under a volunteering lens is frequently tied to a set of specified activities. This severely limits responsiveness to local community needs. Support for participation-building infrastructure under the principle of *bounded flexibility* will benefit from the ability to be flexible and responsive to local needs within broad social cohesion goals.

7.5   Principle 5: Social cohesion requires working in partnership

Participation building infrastructure can never be 'owned' or managed by one entity. Local government facilities, parks and gardens, Neighbourhood Houses, retail, community centres, private homes and social enterprise hubs are all examples of places where social participation activities can take place. It is vital that they are 'hyper-local' – where the people are. This will require new levels of communication, partnership-building, respect and commitment to action by many stakeholders.

7.6   Principle 6: Volunteer support sector must embrace the opportunity to evolve

Volunteering is a laudable and essential activity. Yet the way it is viewed, supported and funded must evolve in keeping with the contemporary needs of Australian society. Those who work in and for the volunteer support sector must recognise that volunteer support, in its current form, is limited in its ability to deliver social cohesion. This presents an opportunity to evolve into a participation support sector which can be embraced.

7.7   Principle 7: Success is determined by impact not activity measures

To determine the success of participation initiatives, performance must be measured by impact. The success of the support sector should be determined by the impact it has on building community-wide social cohesion.

8. Recommendations

8.1   Broadening the remit of the volunteer support sector to better build social cohesion

8.1.1   Recommendation 1: Expand the emphasis, language, and basic orientation of the volunteering support sector from 'volunteering' to 'participation'

The opportunity to build social cohesion will come from the **expansion of the notion of volunteering** – to see it and support it as part of a broader continuum of participatory action; one more in line with contemporary Australian society and more in line with the principles of asset-based community development (ABCD).

Volunteering is essential to the very fabric of society. Yet, the support for volunteering in its current form is highly transactional in nature and based in historical ideals and therefore, it is limited in the degree to which it can transform communities and build social cohesion. Many communities and cultures act in mutual support without ever thinking of it as volunteering. Many vulnerable groups experience barriers to volunteering. And the act of engaging volunteers (those with the privilege and skills) to 'volunteer to' vulnerable groups can have the unintended effect of reinforcing inequity of opportunity and power and is therefore limited in its ability to build social cohesion.

8.1.2   Recommendation 2: Acknowledge Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs) are in the best position to foster the development of participation-building infrastructure in support of social cohesion

Volunteer Resource Centres are in the best position to evolve into organisations that can deliver services in support of the broader continuum of participatory action. They have deep community connections and a strong understanding of local needs. However, participatory action requires participation-building infrastructure which includes people, physical assets, facilities, skills, tools and resources. Evolution of these organisations and the expansion of their remit and resourcing is the best way to improve participation-building infrastructure.

Participating-building infrastructure includes physical facilities, people to run them, skills, relationships and also digital and online facilities. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, we need to be cautious about an over-reliance on online resources. They play a part but cannot replace human contact.

8.2   A strategic framework to support sector transition

8.2.1   Recommendation 3: Co-design and implement a *National Participation Strategy*

To ensure a united and impactful community participation effort to build social cohesion, a **National Participation Strategy** needs to be co-designed and implemented to guide the development of participation-building infrastructure. This strategy will be best served with a strong commitment to co-design which encompasses community organisations, community members, relevant government departments and others. The strategy should guide and inform the evolution of the volunteer support sector and expand its focus to include participation-building and social cohesion.

8.2.2   Recommendation 4: Develop and implement *Regional Participation Plans*

To ensure social cohesion is supported across all communities in Australia, there is a need to localise the National Participation Strategy. To enable this to occur, it is recommended that **Regional Participation**

Plans are developed and implemented. This will enable local communities to participate and respond to the National Participation Strategy within their local contexts to address their community needs. It is recommended that the responsibility for developing and implementing these Regional Participation Plans sits with Regional Participation Resource Centres as key facilitators and enablers of regional participation activities (see Recommendation 5).

8.2.3   Recommendation 5: Evolve VRCs into *Regional Participation Resource Centres* (RPRCs) and establish new RPRCs where none exist

It is recommended that VRCs evolve into **community-owned and managed** Regional Participation Resource Centres (RPRCs) that represent the needs of communities across Australia. This evolution must recognise the special focus required in peri-urban, regional, rural and remote communities where there is a lack of participation infrastructure.

As resource centres, RPRCs will play an essential role in linking up, co-ordinating and bringing together regional activities in support of participation and fostering and providing resources to existing and new community-led initiatives. They will play a role in applying the principles of asset-based community development and unlocking latent social capital (community assets and capabilities) in support of stronger communities. The value of localised and place-based community participation capability and capacity cannot be underestimated. For example, the Royal Australian College of GPs in partnership with the Consumers Health Forum of Australia has recommended incorporating social prescribing into health system planning and service delivery to deliver better healthcare and stronger communities (RACGP, 2019). Stronger communities, that can support themselves contributes to a stronger Australian economy.

8.2.4   Recommendation 6: Develop an action research and ongoing evaluation program to inform practise, innovation and policy

To support the sector transition, investment and support for ongoing action research and a shared **National Participation Outcomes Framework** to evaluate and guide learning in the sector will be essential. Social cohesion cannot be measured by the number of people participating, and the value of this time invested alone. It must be measured by the social change and value experienced within communities. Ensure the action research is responsive to identified practise and policy needs and facilitates collaborative impact-focused research across government, industry, community and academia – to enable continuous evolution. A shared national outcomes framework and support for the sector to strengthen their evaluation capacity and capability, connect and learn from other regions will also be critical.

8.3   Appropriate resourcing to support transition

8.3.1   Recommendation 7: Provide three years of transition funding to support sector transition and its evaluation

To enable the volunteer sector to contribute more fully to social cohesion, meaningful transition funding is required. The existing volunteer sector requires investment to develop workforce leadership, capacity and skills to design new approaches to address a broader remit from volunteering to participation. This transition funding should also include the establishment of new RPRCs in areas where there is no representation, drawing upon existing community assets and strengths.

It also needs to be acknowledged that the existing VMA funding model, where Volunteer State based peaks are funded as VRCs has created a dynamic that finds the peaks competing with other VRCs. To unite, strengthen and transition the sector, the transition funding needs to support the capacity for collaborative impact, where the sector is enabled to work together and across other sectors, united by the National Participation Strategy.

Essential to the success of this transition is funding for an impact evaluation that will enable the sector to learn and evolve together.

8.3.2   Recommendation 8: Provide a commitment to long-term core funding

To enable PRPCs to meaningfully contribute in an ongoing way to social cohesion, certainty of long-term core funding is required. It is envisaged that during the transition period, RPRCs will begin to support their growth with the development of diversified funding. The core funding investment should recognise the scale of the opportunity here and go well beyond the 25c per person per year currently provided through the Volunteer Management Activity (that is, $18.8 million over three years for all Australia).

Providing core funding should contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of RPRCs and enable the development of stronger leadership and governance capacity of organisations. This will enable them to evolve their approaches and ensure the participation support sector attracts and retains a high-calibre, entrepreneurial and skilled workforce. This workforce should have capacity and resources to build strong community engagement and contribute to partnerships and networks across all sectors.

A strengthened sector would have the skills and resources to leverage the core funding to evolve their own diversified funding models, attracting investments from various sectors to contribute to the sustainability of their effort to strengthen social cohesion.

Certainty of core funding will also enable the RPRCs to build community readiness to prepare for, respond to and recover from, disasters and emergencies.

Methodology summary

This research project was conducted from June 2018 to August 2020 and adopted a mixed-method approach to exploring and articulating the relationship between volunteer engagement and social cohesion. It consisted of extensive research and stakeholder engagement in the form of one-on-one interviews, focus groups, community visits and co-design workshops across the volunteer sector to map the current volunteer ecosystem and establish recurring themes, challenges and insights. In the course of the research over 170 individuals were engaged.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the following people and organisations for being part of this research:

Table 5: List of stakeholders engaged in the study

Staff, volunteers, participants and community members involved in the research sites:
Albury-Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau (AWVRB)
Centre for Participation (CfP)
Hunter Volunteer Centre (HVC)
Northern Volunteering (NVSA)
Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC)
NNVRC members
Alex Haynes, Whittlesea Community Connections Inc., Whittlesea, VIC
Annette Sheppard, Volunteers Far North Queensland Inc.
Anthony Ross, Hunter Volunteer Centre Inc., Hunter Valley, NSW
Donatella Amos, Northern Volunteering Inc., SA
Helen Yorston, Bendigo Volunteer Resource Centre, Bendigo VIC
Jemma Toohey, Albury-Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau Inc., NSW/VIC
Jenni Beeston-Mortimer, Northern Rivers Community Gateway, NSW
Julie Pettett, Chair, NNVRC
Kerry Strauch, The Centre for Continuing Education, Wangaratta, VIC
Mel White, Southern Volunteering, SA
Robert Millar, Centre for Participation, Wimmera, VIC
Thu-Trang Tran, Volunteer West, Western Melbourne, VIC

Community members and organisations
Community members of Mernda Community House
Horsham Agricultural Society
Horsham Table Tennis Association
St. Arnaud Community Resource Centre
The Bhutanese community of Albury Wodonga
Youth participants of the Youth forum to reimagining volunteering
African Think Tank
Australian Red Cross
City of Playford
City of Port Adelaide Enfield
City of Salisbury
City of Tea Tree Gully Council
Department of Health and Human Services
Disability Employment Australia
Duke Street Community House
Global Village
Jobs Australia
Lighthouse Disability
Resilient Melbourne
Salisbury Uniting Church
Thomastown West Community Hub
Volunteering Australia
Volunteering Western Australia

Methodology in five phases

The research has been undertaken in five phases as illustrated and further described below.
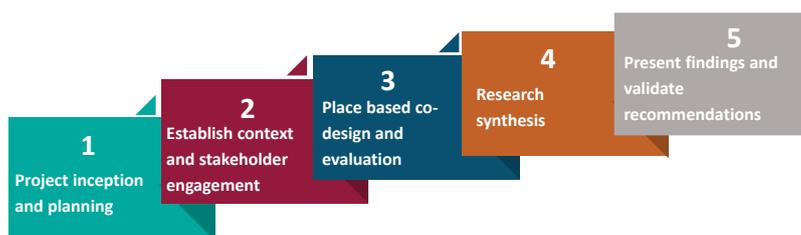

Figure 35: Methodology overview

Phase 1: Project inception and planning

The inception of the project involved a kick-off meeting with the Centre for Participation to establish timelines, deliverables and accountabilities. During this phase, the National Network of Volunteer Resource Centres (NNVRC), that included the five research sites, was engaged as the research working group.

Phase 2: Establish context and stakeholder engagement

During this phase extensive desktop research was conducted that resulted in a literature review on social cohesion and volunteering in the Australian and international context. A working group workshop was facilitated, and stakeholders were identified to participate in the volunteer sector theory of change workshop.

This phase included identification and mapping of stakeholders in the five place-based research sites. The five sites were visited to conduct focus groups and semi-structured interviews with the organisations, volunteers and community members. Each site was visited at least twice, the purpose of which was to observe and understand the activities and dynamics of each site that contribute to greater social cohesion and community participation.

Other stakeholders across the sector were engaged through semi-structured interviews, focus groups and a survey to map the current volunteer ecosystem and to establish recurring themes, challenges and insights for social cohesion.

An important consideration was to obtain as broad a perspective as possible. The qualitative research data was explored through thematic analysis identifying patterns of meaning across the stakeholder interviews, focus groups, observations and workshops in order to provide detailed findings. See Table 6 for the detailed list of the stakeholder engagement.

This phase was revisited, and more desktop research and stakeholder engagement took place to capture implications of the bushfires and COVID-19.

- Key deliverables/actions:
    - **Literature review:** this included a comprehensive overview of the literature exploring and identifying existing research that has identified the shape of effective volunteer engagement and its relationship to the elements of social cohesion and the key dynamics contributing to this impact. Over 100 documents were reviewed in this phase.
    - **Sector-wide theory of change workshop:** this workshop included volunteer sector representatives from peak bodies, VRCs, VIOs, job network agencies and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The aim of the workshop was getting a sector-wide understanding of the link between social cohesion and volunteer engagement as well as filling important research gaps into informal/formal participation in voluntary activity in Australia and its implications for greater or lesser social inclusion.
    - **Qualitative stakeholder engagement:** Over 45 interviews, five focus groups and three formal workshops with volunteers, community members, representatives VRCs, VIOs, community organisations, governmental departments, businesses and NFP were held. In the course of the research over 170 individuals were engaged.
    - **Quantitative stakeholder engagement:** an online survey for community members was developed and shared with the four sites for further distribution. However due to a low response number (44 in total) and the majority of the respondents being from one site, only the qualitative parts of the survey were used in the research.
    - **Fieldwork:** Albury-Wodonga Volunteer Resources Bureau, Centre for Participation, Northern Volunteering and Whittlesea Community Connections were visited at least twice during the study.

Phase 3: Place based co-design and evaluation

Four sessions were held in which staff members of the four VRCs and community members participated. Three sessions were facilitated by Think Impact and one by the VRCs staff members. The focus of the sessions was understanding the current needs and trends in the community with regard to the key elements of social cohesion and how existing volunteer engagement activity could contribute.

- Key deliverables/actions:
    - A community facilitation guide was developed and shared with the working group.
    - Four co-design sessions were held.

Phase 4: Research synthesis

This phase included final consultations with the five research sites and members of the NNVRC. It also involved all activities associated with amalgamating findings and developing the report. The results of the synthesis phase comprise the content of this report.

- Key deliverables/actions:
    - Consultations: One consultation session was held with each of the research sites to validate site findings and finalise the case studies. Five sessions with the NNVRC members were held to explore and discuss the opportunities and challenges in the context of COVID-19.
    - Draft report: a draft report was shared and discussed with the NNVRC.

Phase 5: Present findings and recommendations

The final phase involved developing the final report.

- Key deliverable/action:
    - Final report.

Table 6: Detailed list of stakeholder engagement

Phase	Method	Who	Tasks	Timing	Total
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Face-to-face workshop with working group	Representatives of the five research sites	• Project orientation • Developing a shared understanding of the different types of volunteer engagement • Mapping the connection between volunteer engagement and social cohesion • Confirming roles and responsibilities	August 2018	One workshop
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Face-to-face in-depth interviews with working group members	Representatives of the five research sites	• Mapping the context and challenges of the research sites • Understanding the selected programs/activities for the case studies	September 2018 – January 2019	Seven interviews
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Sector-wide theory of change workshop	Stakeholders from VRCs, VIOs, volunteering peak body, DHHS, an employment agency and an NFP	• Develop a generally agreed 'theory of change' that creates a line-of-sight between volunteer engagement and social cohesion. • Develop a sector-wide shared understanding of language used to define 'social cohesion', 'volunteer engagement' and other relevant terms • Develop a shared way of understanding what it means to give of time, with free will for the benefit of others and how value is created	October 2018	One workshop 15 attendees
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Face-to-face in-depth interviews with external stakeholders	Stakeholders from DHHS, VRCs, VIOs, employment agencies, peak bodies, research organisations and community organisations	• The implications of the different forms of volunteering for communities, organisations and the sector • The role of organisations • Links between volunteer engagement and social cohesion	August 2018 – January 2019	16 interviews

Phase	Method	Who	Tasks	Timing	Total
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Face-to-face in-depth interviews and face-to-face focus group	Whittlesea community members (including beneficiaries and volunteers)	• Mernda Community House • Role and impact of volunteering • Volunteer experience, challenges and community wants/needs • The link between volunteering and social cohesion	October 2018	Three interviews One focus group, four attendees
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Face-to-face in-depth interviews and informal focus group/ conversations	Albury-Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau volunteers, staff and community members (program beneficiaries)	• Cards and Coffee program • Role and impact of volunteering • Volunteer experience, challenges and community wants/needs • The link between volunteering and social cohesion	November 2018	Four interviews Eight informal conversations
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus groups	Northern Volunteering staff and volunteers, and staff at a VIO	• Youth inclusion framework • Role and impact of volunteering • Volunteer experience, challenges and community wants/needs • The link between volunteering and social cohesion	February 2019	Seven interviews
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Online survey	Community members	• Survey for community members to understand and support participation and social cohesion	July 2019	44 respondents
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Focus group	Whittlesea community members	• Mernda Community House • How to take a participatory transformational approach to volunteering to contribute to social cohesion	February 2020	One focus group Five attendees

Phase	Method	Who	Tasks	Timing	Total
2. Establish context and stakeholder engagement	Face-to-face workshop with working group	Representatives of the three research sites	• A new direction for the volunteer sector • How well the current model of engaging volunteers supports social cohesion	February 2020	One workshop Three attendees
3. Place based co-design and evaluation	Place-based co-design workshops: Horsham	Centre for Participation staff member and four representatives of three VIO and community organisations	• How VIOs and community organisation can co-design programs with the community • Understanding and governing for participation • VRCs role in building VIOs capacity	May 2019	One workshop Five attendees
3. Place based co-design and evaluation	Place-based co-design workshops: Albury-Wodonga	Albury-Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau program participants, volunteers and staff from community organisations	• Co-design the Cards and Coffee program: participants' wants and needs • Community cohesion and social inclusion in Albury-Wodonga	July 2019	One workshop 22 program participants, Six volunteers Five staff
3. Place based co-design and evaluation	Place-based co-design workshops: North-Adelaide	Northern Volunteering staff, youth, support workers, government, community organisations and VIOs representatives	• Youth forum to reimagining volunteering	July 2019	One workshop 40 youth 10 support workers and others

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Phase	Method	Who	Tasks	Timing	Total
3. Place based co-design and evaluation	Place-based co-design workshops: Whittlesea	Whittlesea Community Connection staff member and community members	• Co-design the Mernda Community House • Community cohesion and social inclusion in Whittlesea	August 2019	One workshop 12 community members 1 staff
4. Research synthesis	Virtual consultation sessions	Members of the NNRVC	• Share insights, opportunities and challenges COVID-19 has brought to volunteering and social cohesion • Consultation on report findings and recommendations	April – August 2020	Five session
4. Research synthesis	In-depth interviews	Representatives of the five research sites	• Building case studies around the dimensions of social cohesion • COVID-19 implications to volunteering	August 2020	Five interviews

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