BROTHERHOOD
of St LAURENCE

Values and civic behaviour in Australia

Report of the focus group discussions

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The National Engagement Project Trial

Values and civic behaviour in Australia

Project documents available on the Brotherhood's web site <www.bsl.org.au>

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Issues that have 'stirred up' Australians in the last 12 months

Participants named a variety of issues which concerned, interested or 'stirred them up' in the last 12 months. There was a clear distinction between big issues such as the asylum seekers and War on Terrorism, and local issues, such as disputes with neighbours over trees or noise, town planning, and road safety.

There was no distinction in the type of issues raised based on lifecycle nor stage in the Behaviour Change Continuum. The exception was the teenage groups who, though struggling to nominate any issues, referred to big issues mainly because they were generally unaware of the impact of local government on their lives.

Some of the big issues are summarised below.

Issues	Groups
Refugees & immigration	• All groups
September 11, War on Terrorism, and war in general	• All singles and couples groups • All parent groups with the exception of pre-contemplators • Teen groups • (Mentioned later in discussions by older adult groups)
Health (resources) & premiums	• Singles and couples, sensitised and contemplating • Parents with dependent children, pre-contemplators and sensitised and contemplating
Education (tertiary places, resources, class sizes, resources, and curriculum)	• Singles and couples, sensitised and contemplating • Parents with dependent children, pre-contemplators • Older adults, trial action
Business collapses and job insecurity	• Singles & couples, sensitised and contemplating and sustained action • Parents with dependent children, sensitised and contemplating • Older adults, pre-contemplators
Government processes and integrity (incl. Governor-General)	• Parents with dependent children, pre-contemplators, contemplating and sensitised • Older adults, pre-contemplators and trial action
Population changes (aging & dependency ratio)	• Singles & couples sensitised and contemplating and trial action • Older adults, pre-contemplators
Stem cell research	• Singles & couples, sensitised and contemplating, sustained action • Parent with dependent children, trial action • Older adults, pre-contemplators
Other issues	Cost of living e.g. increasing house prices; public transport and other roads and infrastructure issues; indigenous reconciliation; drugs; crime; gangs; aged care; environment; water availability; light sentencing; assistance for people with disabilities; youth depression.

This list with mentions of refugees, stem cell research and even the Governor-General quite clearly reflects how closely the knowledge gained from this research is linked to its time and place. This is an important point, as if opinions and areas of concern are so closely aligned with media headlines, then they could be expected to change within fairly brief spans of time.

Participants were also asked whether, in the last 12 months, they had endorsed a message about which a group or a person had spoken out. Groups mentioned included World Vision —which was a popular choice for 'actually doing something' (Female teen)—as well as Amnesty International and Greenpeace. Older and sustained action group participants felt that the unsung heroes were Australia's volunteers and it was their actions that sustained Australia. People were more able to recall media headlines than to identify groups with messages of social concern.

Media and its influence

It is not surprising that despite efforts to avoid prompting a 'who's who' of the latest media stories, the big issue stories named were precisely that type of detail. Participants treated their own personal causes and concerns such as animal welfare and AIDS as quite separate. It was only through the course of the discussion that it became clear that people had other causes which motivated them:

> Actually drugs didn't even get up there and drugs is a real strong issue for me and I just totally forgot it (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplation).

This research demonstrated that media significantly influences what the important issues are for stories that aren't local. Within their own community, on the other hand, people can assess first-hand the 'news'. When stories occur in another suburb, state or country, people must rely upon the media to notify them of the stories and present all the facts. The media represents one degree of separation from the event.

This implies two important outcomes for community agencies:

- Media work is essential to ensure people can learn of and about social problems and solutions.
- Media work must provide opportunities for people to connect the issues within the story to aspects of their own life including their own neighbourhood, surrounding suburbs, as well as other interests around which communities form. This will help address the current cynicism about the reliability of media.

Participants were knowledgeable and critical of the media, expressing concerns about the media's story selection and sensationalising of the news:

> I think we're so poorly served by our media. (Parents with dependent kids, sustained action).

The media was seen to determine, by what they feature, what the priorities are for Australians:

> They do have too much power. (Older adult, sustained action).

> It really annoys me, the way they [the media] pick and chose what they want to tell people and what they want to make an issue of. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

> What you see on the TV, 90 per cent of it is what they want you to see, not what is actual fact, what's going to sell, what's going to get money in their pockets. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

Some people alluded to a concern that, between media sensationalism and selective reporting, 'things don't add up'. The sense of missing information stopped some participants from involvement in action on an issue because they were not confident they were fully informed:

> Is there a missing link that we the community are not hearing about? … Why is it taking so long [to process asylum seekers] or are they all just sitting there filing their nails saying, 'Oh, they can wait another year, we'll do them next year'? There's something that doesn't gel as to why it's taking so long. (Younger adult, trial action)

Not all group participants felt Australia was poorly served by the media nor thought that the media as influential as others suggested.

> Let's say this hypothetical independent media source told you the truth. If you already had an opinion on something you would automatically assume that the independent media source was biased to the left perhaps. If you had the opposing view you'd assume the media source was to the right … I think you have to rely on facts that you're given and use the personal internal filter to break it down because ultimately the truth will never actually be presented to you… (Younger adult, trial action)

As the standard of media was a popular issue there may exist considerable scope for gaining the participation of individuals in providing negative and positive feedback to media.

> The thing that I don't like about the media is the way they form the way you think about things. (Parent with dependant children, sensitised/contemplating)

How people respond when they are 'stirred up' about an issue

Minimal response

Participants reported that they would become frustrated, angry, and sometimes even quite distressed by the issues they heard about or saw in their local community. A strong sense of powerlessness was evident for issues that were national or international. To some degree people even 'switched off' from hearing about these issues purely because they create negative emotions which the individual felt unable to resolve.

> I think a lot of people can't cope emotionally with these issues and therefore their only solution is to turn a blind eye. (Younger adult, sustained action)

These feelings were less evident for issues within one's own community, be it geographical or other interest or work based, as problems closer to home seemed more manageable.

Because there were so many good causes individuals could be involved in and so many problems requiring action there was a sense that one's efforts would be just one drop in a pond. This contributed to feelings of disempowerment and being overwhelmed.

> It's a little bit frustrating because for everything that comes good, there's a million other things ... It just sort of feels like it's never ending… You feel like you're taking the weight of the world on your shoulders and it's sort of a bit much sometimes. (Younger adult, sustained action)

> I don't know that it's lazy but there's just more issues now, like now the issue is refugees so that's like everyone's on the refugees and I think people just move with the issues of the most relevant.' (Younger adult, trial action)

> Sometimes we choose to block it because it's so hard. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator)

Connecting actions about poverty to addressing other issues as well may help people feel they are addressing a number of problems in one action.

Talking with family and friends was a common outlet for these emotions. Students might also talk to their teachers. A few would keep it to themselves: 'Oh, I've only steamed up inside' (Older adult, pre-contemplator).

> Actually I must admit I haven't done anything about it [conservation issues]… I've talked to a lot of friends... (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

Participants noted that the emotional reaction they have to certain events and issues is fleeting:

> Some commercials I'm like 'You poor person'… then 'Friends' comes back on so you forget about it.' (Male teen)

However, ignoring a problem would often result in a number of other emotions including selfishness and guilt. For example, one pre-contemplator feels guilty when she drives past the blood bank each day, yet she is quite aware that within a minute or two she will have been distracted by the radio, traffic, and other thoughts, and her feelings of guilt will have dissipated. Participants admitted with surprising frankness that they did wait until an issue personally affected them before coming involved.

> People try and get on with their lives—and I think that that's what you have to do—but the issues are still there and we just sort of try and turn away and forget about them, because... [we'd] rather get on with our own lives. (Younger adult, sustained action)

This implies that people handle their emotional response rather than fix the problem. Even sustained action participants acknowledged that they could be sidetracked when they had 'gone back home and got busy'. People felt poorly about themselves for not becoming involved in more action. A few participants became quite defensive during the discussion, citing time constraints as limiting their ability to contribute.

Response with limited reflection

Participants often felt quite bad about their perceived inadequate contribution even when it was clear that many had been involved in occasional activity. For example, one teenager had been on the 40 Hour Famine and had planted trees with his mother for environmental causes. This boy described himself as being uninvolved and when reflecting on this he experienced some feelings of guilt. Only those individuals involved in sustained action believed they were 'doing their bit', and this was more evident in the older age groups.

This research has touched upon a difficulty for participants. They simply don't know how to decide the appropriate level of contribution they should be making. All participants intuitively felt that they should be involved and concerned about their community to some degree. A number wanted the feeling of personal satisfaction they believed they would get from involvement. In a highly individually focused world, however, finding an appropriate balance was the challenge. Many people preferred to be passive observers rather than to take the step of becoming involved.

Commitment to action

A small segment of individuals were activists. Their level of compassion did not appear to differ from the majority of participants; instead it was their willingness to respond with action that distinguished this segment. These people felt they simply could not ignore a problem. What further distinguished this group was their involvement in the big issues—that is those extending beyond their immediate community or, national and international issues. Many other participants started to resemble this activist sub-segment when the problem came close to home.

For this segment of individuals ready to be involved in 'big issue' action the engagement task is relatively easy *if* they are concerned about poverty. Agencies targeting social change in the area of poverty must be vocal about our desire to work with people willing to tackle the big issues. However, a strategy used by this audience to protect themselves from the sheer volume of important causes is to select one cause and devote their time to it. This approach was seen to maximise effort and impact, ability to assess results, and building knowledge of a particular area so they felt informed. These activists were glad to hear that others were involved with a range of problems in Australia as this meant someone was addressing the problems.

The first target audience that welfare agencies must cultivate are the individuals willing to be involved in action at the local and other community levels. Programs and projects should be targeted at this audience with a goal to gain first local community involvement, with a view to possible expansion to big issue content.

The second target audience that the welfare agencies must cultivate are the people concerned with 'big issues'. Agencies must continue to be vocal in requesting support from current activists already concerned about poverty. Secondly, partnerships and shared projects with other social, health and environmental causes which will also address a poverty concern should be pursued to gain the benefit of other activists motivated by other concerns.

Actions in which people had been involved

Yearly events and activities

Most of the action younger people had become involved in was in response to direct advertising (e.g on television), or involvement of friends in events such as the 40 Hour Famine, Walk Against Want. A few had been involved in environmental activities such as Clean Up Australia Day and tree-planting projects. Others indicated they were members or supporters of various groups, though often they had been personally approached to become involved.

One female teen had been quite active in gaining school-wide support for the 40 Hour Famine. She had addressed the whole of her school and had all students participate in the event. As a result of her efforts she was invited to attended a youth leadership conference. She was pleased with her efforts and felt she had raised money for a good cause: 'It was really good, I got so much back from that… I learnt so much. With so many people *I* made it all come together.' Yet see made a contradictory statement in another stage of the discussion:

> I'm concerned that people want me to have an opinion but I don't know enough to have an opinion. The people standing outside Flinders Street they're 'like free the refugees'. I don't want to talk to them because I don't have any clue, an opinion. (Female teen)

Of note with activities and events such as the 40 Hour Famine and Walk Against Want was the fact that one-time involvement did not necessarily lead to continuing action: as one person said, 'I've already done it'. This implies that there is a personal challenge or novelty attraction of being involved in these special projects. The cluster of attention and discussion that would accompany these actions are a clear personal benefit to the individual in addition to the cause being charitable.

Though one action may not foster an ongoing commitment to civic involvement amongst people, the novelty value for these activities tap into other drivers particularly for younger Australians. Through involvement in these special events there may be other opportunities to education and solicit further involvement. The notion of special events not only as a fundraising idea but as a show of concern about an issue should be explored further. For instance, the introduction of some novelty activities targeted at younger Australians for October 17, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, should be considered.

Changing behaviour

Participants rarely mentioned how they changed their own behaviour. This was despite support for the concept of being responsible first of all for 'looking after one's backyard'. Only one group discussed how they don't buy Nike clothes due to Nike's reported treatment of employees and because of the business practice of marking up the products to such a large degree.

> After seeing documentaries I purposely won't buy that sort of thing [Nike]…We'd probably all make a difference if everyone stopped buying Nike. Where would Nike be? (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

Volunteering

Parents and older adults, along with fewer younger people, had volunteered their time at op shops or in the care of people with disabilities or the aged and ill. Individuals in sustained action were involved through varied organisations or had responded to newspaper advertisements.

> I went up to the Home [Rehabilitation Clinic] and I noticed a few of the ladies were saying they were cold, so I approached the Country Women's and we all got together and we knitted these lovely rugs…Ever since then we've taken on a lot more things like that. (Older adult, sustained action)

Organisations with which people were involved were numerous and varied. Church organisations, charities, other not for profits and environmental groups were mentioned. Political parties were less frequently identified.

Trends in community involvement

Participants were of the view that overall, Australians were becoming less community minded than in the past. Reasons given for this change included:
- reduced time available as people work longer hours;
- concerns about building relationships with one's community as it might result in requests on time, loss of privacy, etc;
- less homogeneous neighbourhoods (that is, not all households in a geographical area are of a similar type, e.g. families with young children); and
- focus on self as first priority, exacerbated by growing competition in society and by the communications revolution (reducing the need for face-to-face contact).

As one participant commented:

> I'm not from a religious family and so it's not instilled to be selfless and it's more dog-eat-dog. In most of society it's look after yourself and your family and then if you have time, and only then, help in some other area. But we're not encouraged to do it. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

Presenting a different view of community trends were some older adults who felt Australians *were* community minded, in spite of agreeing that the people who are not involved include 'normal people' who are too busy with work or families. They maintained that 'the day of the volunteer isn't finished'.

Though disconnected neighbourhoods were becoming more prevalent, some groups spoke of the loss this caused. For instance, the parents of dependent children in trial action spoke longingly of having a neighbourhood where people know each other and feel their kids are safe because a neighbour is watching, and where property is safe because neighbours look out for each other. They said that when connected communities occurred it was usually children forming relationships with each other that brought the parents together. Loss of privacy and potentially time-consuming requests by neighbours were two disadvantages of connected communities.

The in-depth interviews suggested that for younger Australians, 'communities' are associated with common interest groups (e.g.sailing clubs) rather than mere geography. This avenue of potential involvement should be explored further as an opportunity for engagement.

Barriers to action

The focus groups discussed a number of barriers to action. It must be recognised that participants could only be as open and frank about barriers to involvement as they were aware. Multiple techniques and approaches were used to tap into this type of information to reach new depths of information and to allow participants the opportunity to surprise even themselves.

It has already been identified that a major driver of action and inaction is the ability for individuals to control their own reactions to issues. People take the shortest route to resolve their concerns. When a problem emerges, they can wait 30 seconds and their thoughts will have moved onto another issue—which is a convenient 'solution' to the problem. However, if a problem is constantly presented and unavoidable—it may be a local government issue—ignoring the problem will not be the easiest solution. Taking action and creating change may be the quickest and most satisfactory way to resolve the problem.

Some of the specific barriers that were identified are summarised below:
- lack of knowledge about issues, creating concern about being uninformed and advocating for an incorrect solution;
- a feeling of disempowerment, including the belief they would not be listened to or could make a difference;
- time and financial constraints;
- fear that being involved would result in emotional or physical harm;
- dislike of standing out in a crowd;
- an apathetic or, laid-back Australian culture which is not conducive of action on issues; and
- involvement will cause a life change.

Community agencies should focus on placing the problem of poverty into the sight of Australians and present simple and effective opportunities for them to resolve the problem.

Insufficient knowledge

Participants felt their lack of information was a barrier to further involvement as they did not want to take an uninformed stance:

> I'd have to know enough about it before I stand up for something one week and realise it's completely stupid the next. (Female teen)

> I haven't [taken action] because I don't know what to believe with what you hear… until I can feel confident that I've heard the whole story then I don't want to go out and start protesting because I'm not 100 per cent sure about it. (Younger adult, trial action)

> You can think you feel strongly about something but if you don't know the whole picture and you know you don't know the whole picture, can you really get out there and make a decision? (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

The belief that others have more information seemed to absolve some participants from responsibility:

> If there was something to do they probably would have thought about it already. (Female teen).

> I always feel as though people that are being put in a position to do a job must know more than I do. I really do think they must know more, so my opinion I think that it's not worthy of much. (Older adult, pre-contemplator)

Lack of knowledge about how to instigate action, particularly how to gain support from others, was another barrier:

> I get stirred up but then come to a full stop…I don't know how to get in contact with others. It's very frustrating. (Older adult, trial action)

A feeling of disempowerment

With the exception of the small number of 'activists', participants felt their opinion or voice would have little impact on the big issues, which seemed too daunting for one person to tackle. Some

participants simply felt there was no action open to them, for example regarding the war between Israel and Palestine. Comments included:

> I'm not really lazy, I just think that my opinion won't count. (Male teen)

> You think you won't make a difference. The only way I would do something is if I thought me doing it could make a difference. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

> A lot of issues that crop up you're feeling like you can't do anything about because you know you're just one voice. (Younger adult, sustained action)

A lack of empowerment was particularly noticeable for international issues. People felt less able to comprehend and influence a situation. Participants were not confident that their letters or emails would reach the right people:

> If it was something happening in your street or in your suburb, I'd probably go and do something especially if it was to do with my child—that's something you can make a difference—but the bigger issues. (Parent with dependent children, Trial action)

When the issue related to local governance or affected someone personally, participants felt they were better informed, entitled to have an opinion, and able to communicate with community leaders.

> I grew up in a country town and it's in that sort of small community environment you felt like you could make a difference with local issues. (Younger adult, sustained action)

> For me, if it's something like stem cell [research]… it will affect me deeply and I'll have a really strong opinion about it but what can I do… If it's totally affecting you and it's in your neighbourhood there's a difference. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

> We all just sit back and [think] whoever's going through it now can worry about it and do it and then when our turn comes we'll act upon it then. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplating)

Even the general belief that one person could not make a difference faded when a problem was personally affecting an individual. For example, one participant told of a petition that he instigated that gained only two signatures. Normally this small response would be a barrier to further action but because the behaviour he was attempting to change kept him from sleeping at night he pursued the action and ultimately won.

A concept that resonated with some participants was 'looking after your own backyard', which meant focusing on their own behaviour or on issues which affected them directly before taking a broader view. They felt that if everyone took responsibility for their situation, many problems would be resolved. However some were unsure whether this would be seen as doing enough. Again this relates to a lack of a yardstick that seemed to cause participants difficulty in assessing their civic contributions. Supporting a 'look after your own backyard' approach would resonate and would represent feasible action for many participants.

> I'm more concerned about my own little nucleus than trying to make the place a better place.(Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Predictably, those people who were already involved in social action did not feel the same degree of disempowerment or detachment, concerning either local or broader issues.

It was interesting to note that low self-efficacy was evident across all ages. Teenagers felt that it was only adults who could make an impact as 'no-one listens to kids'. Yet older Australians felt politicians were particularly interested in hearing the voice of the youth:

> They take more notice of the kids than they take notice of the grown ups now. (Older adult, sustained action)

Failed action was a barrier to further action for some participants.

> I use to be involved in fostering on weekends of children under the age of 15 and it was fulfilling. But then you put time and effort into these kids… these kids would go back to the system and the system use to undo everything. You can't win… I gave it away—it's just too tiring, too demanding and I'm sorry but my efforts weren't going anywhere. I was disillusioned in the end. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

> I fought to save Prince Henry's Hospital. I fought to save the South Melbourne Tech. I got 2000 signatures to save these places. I think they put it through the shredder, up at the Town Hall. I won't fight for anything in this area any more. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

Working with an organisation made people feel more confident of success. Agencies need to encourage people both to have realistic expectations and to take the kind of action which has a reasonable chance of success. It is important for them to be able to recognise and celebrate even small successes.

Time and financial constraints

Time and financial constraints were regularly mentioned as limitations on involvement.

> There's so much need in the community and people just don't have the time. They're working full time and they have their own families and other commitments and they just don't have those resources to then give up one day a week, or one day a month even, to do something. (Younger adult, sustained action)

> Yeah, I nearly joined Australians Against Child Abuse last year, which I still plan to do, not sure when though, but yeah… [M: what stopped you?] Just my life, I've got things in my life at the moment that are probably a bit more important you know, that's the problem. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator)

One person related the story of his sister who worked internationally in poor communities for one year. He spoke of the financial loss his sister suffered in order to give to others. While he was proud of his sister's efforts, the notion that an individual's welfare could be undermined by giving to others was discouraging and a barrier to involvement.

> Why should she have to pay [to work for a year]. She had to ultimately make a donation of a couple of thousand dollars. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

These responses suggest it is important to make it possible for people to become involved locally and with minimal expense.

Fear of emotional or physical harm

There was fear associated with involvement with people who might be violent.

> I did volunteer twice for a special school but I was a bit scared of some of the kids actually which sounds really bad but there were a couple of really violent kids there. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator)

> I might go to places where there's elderly people who have no one to care for them, but whether I can handle it or not I'm not too sure about that one. (Older adult, pre-contemplator)

The emotional cost should also be considered. One animal lover once walked dogs at the local animal shelter but seeing the number of animals killed was too draining and this person had to stop.

Just as some people felt disappointed after taking action that failed, some people became disillusioned when the people they tried to assist, judging them to be undeserving or ungrateful for the assistance.

Ensuring that people are adequately warned of potential problems will enable appropriate choices about engagement in the community. Offering a variety of activities will help eliminate this barrier.

Dislike of standing out in a crowd

Standing out in a crowd and taking the lead—especially showing emotion and commitment to action—were daunting prospects. Simply sharing an opinion did not have the same 'standing out in a crowd' connotations. It was thought that to stand out in a crowd would be to invite criticism of one's beliefs and behaviour. One person described this as 'embarrassing', while another would be 'scared' to receive that level of critical attention. There was safety in numbers and being a follower was an appealing way to become involved:

> I didn't want to do it on my own, didn't want to be the first one to send it down to the council [for them to] read my name and say 'He's a trouble maker, that bloke—we'd better watch him'. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

> The one time ever that I actually stood up for myself on an issue that I strongly believed in, this horrid man turned around and told me to stop whingeing and from then on I shut up. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator)

Older Australians were more comfortable approaching their peers and colleagues about an issue. For teenagers however, speaking out was a concern.

> In class I'll get someone else to ask a question, in case it sounds stupid. (Female teen)

> People might think you're a little bit crazy. You have such strong views and then everyone laughs at you. (Female teen)

With the exception of one or two individuals, participants, agreed that it was best to act through an established organisation or group, partially because this would reduce the attention on a single individual. Such action would be more effective and less effort was required to fit into a program than to instigate and lead a new program.

> If you participate in something that's organised and there's leadership and you're just one of the people helping with it, it's very different than if you put your hand up to coordinate something because you['re] actually… setting yourself up for a lot of criticism. (Younger adult, sustained action)

> I think we're all cowards, we all like to do it in a group. We don't like to do it individually in case there's a backlash against us. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

'Laid-back' or apathetic Australian culture

The Australian culture was regularly mentioned as a reason why people don't get involved in action. Australians were seen—to the amusement of younger participants—as laid back and possibly lazy. Actions about social issues simply don't fit with the Australian culture. Participants occasionally indicated they could have been involved in action but it just didn't happen. A shrug of the shoulders was a common 'explanation'. Several participants agreed that Australians were generally apathetic:

> Australians are pretty politically lazy as a nation. (Younger adult, trial action)

> [To not do anything] that's just the Australian way. (Parents with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

> We're not a nation that jumps up and down and screams about things, it's not in our nature. Americans are a bit more so like that. (Younger adult, trial action)

> Unfortunately we're more reactive and proactive aren't we, that's just the way Australian culture is… Isn't it easier to sit back and poke sticks at other people than do something yourself? (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

A subtle theme of not wanting to presume that my opinion is right or that everyone should share the same opinion emerged:

> Each person is entitled to their opinion and nobody is really wrong, you know. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator).

From this perspective, action could be seen as forcing one's opinion onto others.

Despite agreement that Australians are generally passive, it was also mentioned in a few groups that Australians object to obvious bullying tactics. One participant was involved in a rally against a law suggested by Jeff Kennett to ban protesting. Framing action as a response to bullying tactics may be a mechanism to overcome cultural reluctance to act in Australia.

Reluctance to make life changes

This barrier was first identified in the in-depth interviews where one participant felt if he did become involved in some action it would probably cause such a personal change that he would need to rearrange his life. This change was not welcomed for people who were happy in their generally self-focused lifestyle. In this sense, even a small action was a barrier because it represented a beginning.

As noted earlier, people were wary that organisations would make further demands for time and they would have to agree to because it was for a good cause:

> I have a very selfish reason to not be a volunteer, because my time is my own… nobody says 'Tomorrow morning you've got to do this'… [Upon starting action] you know you can't leave something half done, you know you've got to keep on going. (Older adult, pre-contemplator)

> There seems to be less people doing more and once you're involved in something like that… you just find you're doing so much that you really get to the point where you're saying, 'Look, I really can't do that'. It's really hard because some of these organisations are struggling in terms of support. (Younger adult, sustained action)

One person told of a connection with Red Cross which led to additional phone calls asking to do more: 'That can be a little bit annoying.' (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating).

Community agencies must canvas action in a flexible and less confronting manner to enrich the lives of those taking action as well as those the action is being taken on behalf of. The action should not be perceived as life-disrupting but life-enhancing.

What people hope for if they undertake an action

There were a number of benefits desired from being involved in an action. These are summarised below and are somewhat dependent on the type of action. For instance, people involved in advocacy work would expect a change to policy. In volunteer work, a positive reaction from others would be rewarding. Some of the benefits from taking action on social issues include:

- Personal satisfaction of doing what one considers to be right;
- Satisfaction of trying to make a difference;
- Appreciation and support from others;
- Contribution to professional development and career opportunities;
- Social networks and relationships;
- Potential for reciprocity; and
- Setting a good example for your family.

Personal satisfaction of doing what one considers to be right

For most actions, it was the sense that the individual was doing what they considered was right that was the true prize. This benefit was a purely internal response and could withstand negative reactions from others.

> I had a lot of friends that I've helped and not really got anything back but I think, 'Well I'll do it again, because it made me feel good'. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

> It just brings up peace into you because you're doing something. (Younger adult, sustained action)

> The volunteers need help as much as the people they're helping because they want to feel good. (Older adult, sustained action)

> You feel better about yourself because you are not consumed by your own problems all the time. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

At the same time, people had some concerns that action should not involve imposing their own opinions on others. Confidence that they would be 'doing the right thing' seemed stronger for practical 'helping' action than for advocacy.

Satisfaction of trying to make a difference

A major reward and endorsement of one's efforts was being able to make a difference. People felt volunteer work was endorsed when they saw the contribution they made to a person's life, or when they saw they had an impact on policy:

> You get that enjoyment from seeing it in their faces that you've helped them with something simple that we take for granted. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

> It was our part-time cleaner, who thought she had no value,…who did something. It was really simple, didn't cost a lot of money and had a really good outcome. She felt really good about herself that she could do something and that it had the practical effect at the end of it. (Younger adult, sustained action)

> It was really nice. The old people, they're so thankful because they can't do it themselves. It was so rewarding and so simple. Giving someone food to last them the night, they just seemed so happy. (Female teen)

Outcomes of an action must be regarded as a major contributor to sustained action.

Appreciation and support from others

Though satisfying one's own internal drivers is the key to satisfaction with action, people will be supported in their action if they received a 'positive response' from others. The positive response could endorse the value of the activity and, importantly, support the effectiveness of the action. Hence, participants want to be told about their good work to change policy or contribute to the welfare of an individual resulted from the individual's intervention.

Contribution to professional development and career opportunities

A few participants mentioned that volunteer work or advocacy work would benefit professional marketability. Students in particular thought it would be beneficial for their CV. There was some concern that this benefit emerged from one's own self-interest—'It seems kind of selfish in a way'—though ultimately it was agreed that it was a secondary 'bonus' of good intentions.

> Well if it [action] can give you experience in a field that you don't have any experience in… and it looks good on your resume as well... (Younger adult, trial action)

Social networks and relationships

The social aspect of action was a consideration of older sustained action groups. Though they preferred not to think of this as a key driver of their involvement and went to considerable lengths

to demonstrate that they were not a 'tea and scones' club, social networks were an attractive feature of community involvement. Younger people also saw social benefits:

> It may bring you into the company of other people. (Younger adult, sensitised/contemplating)

> I plant trees in parks with my Mum and it's fun because you're talking to other people doing the same thing. (Male teen)

One participant reflected on his youth, recalling the main driver of his involvement in lifesaving was to meet girls. Although participants generally downplayed this benefit, it should be considered a valuable side attraction of involvement. If community organisations aim is to develop cohesive communities, this benefit of involvement should be affirmed.

Potential for reciprocity

The sense that one good deed would be returned was a subtle theme. Some of the older sustained action individuals had experienced reciprocity. Their knowledge of and involvement in certain clubs and charities had placed them in good stead when their partner became ill.

Similarly, some people felt indebted to an organisation and this might be the pre-cursor to active involvement:

> I know my father, St Vincent de Paul helped him a lot. Well, he's worked for them for 20 years...He's there every day. (Parent with dependent children, trial action).

Setting a good example for the family

Setting a good example, by demonstrating the value of community work and spend time with children, was regarded as a benefit of action. One person became involved in Clean Up Australia Day to set a good example for his partner's young children.

> I try and explain it to my daughter and give her a taste of protests and things like that because I think I want her to know things can change if you do something. (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

> I know with my kids at primary school, they're trying to make kids more aware of things that are happening in the community … and be more aware of issues such as equality and the environment. I think that's where the change is going to come. I don't believe I could personally do a lot, maybe I could, but I believe that if I bring the kids up to think this is right… then I think things are going to change. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Parents would support their children in action though the level of support depended on the issue. If the issue was something that the parent didn't agree with, they would allow their child to express their views though they wouldn't provide additional assistance.

> I'd feel ashamed if I said no if they were going to do something worthwhile. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Similarly, students commented that they would take an interest in the activities of their parents, asking why they were involved in an action.

Parents were supportive of their children being informed about community issues though some parents were concerned there was too much pressure placed on children to fundraise and participate in other activities.

> Fundraising! Anyone got primary school kids? It's fundraising non-stop, isn't it? There's one thing after another after another after another. It doesn't stop and even that is just so difficult to keep up with. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator)

The potential to develop strategies which target the participation of couples and families should be explored. The fact that time-strapped individuals indicated that they would only get involved after

attending to family issues reinforces the advantages of encouraging whole of family activity: 'My family comes first and… in your spare time you sort of want to do some things [like] sleep.' (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

Perceptions of those who engage in the community

Emerging from the in-depth interviews was disparity between self-perceptions and the perception of volunteers and other community workers. In the focus group discussions, views about the 'volunteer' and other people involved in the community (e.g. the 'politician') were explored. Participants were also asked what they thought they had in common with these roles.

The volunteer

The volunteer was mostly characterised as an elderly person with time on their hands. Another perception of a volunteer was the younger person with time on their hands and possibly wealth to support them in work described as 'personally meaningful'. Volunteers were characterised as caring, kind hearted, generous people. They were also labelled as 'do gooders'.

> These people [volunteers] do it not to be seen to do it. They really do get something out of it. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

> I've always thought that anybody who volunteers has got to have a little bit of good in them. They're doing something that you're not doing. They're giving up their own time when they could as easily be sitting at home doing something they would much rather be doing. (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

Motivating the volunteer was a desire to care for others. Many participants commented that volunteers were simply a breed apart because they cared more.

The politician

Mentions of 'the politician' immediately prompted negative comments of self-indulgence and grandeur, though there was a difference between the tiers of government. After considerable discussion it was conceded that politicians, though changed by political systems, do start with good intentions.

> What motivates these people. I don't know, is it lust for power?…world domination? (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

Some participants suggested a reason for not taking action on a political matter was their lack of trust in politicians:

> We've probably grown to accept that kind of behaviour from politicians, been conditioned to not trust them and think, 'Oh well, another lie coming out now, that's nothing unusual'. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplating)

Most participants could not identify with a politician. They thought politicians would have a natural calling from an early age, something of a career ambition to be in politics—in the same way as another person would want to teach or practise law. For that reason, if you don't have such a desire for politics, it's simply not something that is considered as a means of community involvement.

The younger singles, couples and parents in the sustained action category expressed a contrasting view. These participants had considered or had joined political parties as a means of having a stronger voice. Their desire to be involved was generated by a sense of civic contribution. They remained critical of politicians and their actions but felt their own involvement in political forums justified the occasional, if not frequent, 'tongue lashing' they gave politicians.

The community organisation worker

In some groups the 'community organisation worker' was profiled, prompting neutral to slightly negative comments from participants, particularly when compared with volunteers. They were seen as ordinary workers receiving a pay packet, not deserving of special regard. A few participants felt that community organisation workers would be more caring about society in general than the average private corporation worker.

The donor

The 'donor' was seen as either the volunteer making financial contributions in addition to their time or, alternatively, the uninvolved wishing to relieve a guilty conscience. It was widely believed that most Australians would donate to charities during the year. Participants believed that people became involved because they were asked, not because they sought involvement.

Perceptions of actions that people can take

The different type of actions people could take about an issue were discussed and people were asked whether they would undertake each action themselves. This information will assist in determining the most effective means of engagement about social concerns in Australia.

Protests

When the study was conducted the protest at the Woomera Detention Centre was a high profile news item and views about the 'protest' were informed by this example. The protest was regarded negatively and protesters seen as violent and insincere about the specific cause. They were labelled 'professional protesters'. For these two reasons protests were seen as causing a disturbance.

> I think they should lock them up along with the refugees. (Older adult, sustained action)

In addition to concerns about violence, participants questioned what protests were attempting to achieve. They felt there were no specific outcomes that protests could win.

> But what exactly are they protesting about…they're saying the problem, have they actually said what the solution is? (Male teen)

> I've been on a protest, rally and things like that… I feel good to lend my support to those things but I feel better if I can do something directly for somebody. (Younger adult, sustained action)

The example of the Save Albert Park group was raised as an ineffective protest action:

> [You've] got two people sitting in a tent over here protesting about Albert Park, getting nowhere… It's ridiculous. They're sitting there in a tent six days a week, eight hours a day... having a cup of tea and a chat. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

On the other hand, at least one person in each group acknowledged the passion and willingness to have a voice in major issues as a positive characteristic of this form of action.

> But a lot of good has come out of protesters. Even though we think Greenies are a blooming nuisance we'd have no green left if there weren't people around. (Older adult, sustained action)

> Remember the thing about the refugees… The newspapers put them as young and violent and irresponsible. Everything was portrayed in such a way that is so negative. What about the positive? They had the guts to go there and say, 'We care'. I mean we are a democracy, we should be able to stand up and say what we feel and what we think. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator)

A handful of participants had attended protests, commonly about a local government issue, and were quite encouraged to find a broad show of support, rather than the 'typical' protesters people tend to expect.

> The only protest I've been involved with was when they wanted watercraft down at Seaford Beach so we had a bit of a gathering about that but it wasn't a placard, spike your hair type protest. (Older adult, sustained action)

The popular profile of protesters must be considered a major deterrent for involvement.

> Aligning ourselves with fanatics… that's a big issue for me. I might agree with some of the principles but I don't know if I really want to go and align myself with those people. (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

> My concern is at the present time when you get to these protests there seems to be too many rogues. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

One older person would not go to protest at Woomera because protesting was seen as uncomfortable: 'I'm too old and too practical. I don't like camping' (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating). Another person who was studying law would not be involved in protests because of the ramifications an arrest may have for his career.

Aligning oneself to a cause with other people who were considered dissimilar might result in these people asking you to be more like them:

> I'm not particularly interested in becoming a vegan, it doesn't interest me in the slightest, but I support what the people are doing [Tasmanian forest protest], they're making a really strong stand to protect something that's important… they might try and make me a vegan. (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

Australia doesn't appear to be a nation of protesters. For some people, the word 'protest' was a turn-off. An event called a rally or a march might be less uncomfortable. If Australians were to attend a rally or march they would need to be confident that the organisers and participants were sincere, the cause genuine, and the occasion non-violent. Ensuring people understand what result is desired and providing feedback about the action and result will encourage repeat behaviour.

If individuals of all ages are to be involved in this type of action, communications will need to emphasise broad and safe community involvement and support.

Petition

Most participants had been involved in signing petitions, however their effectiveness was the cause of debate. Several participants felt petitions were an easy way of making a contribution, but not necessarily a very satisfying one. Though participants felt that 'numbers' were a critical feature of any influence on a decision maker, petitions lacked impact because of the minimal effort of many people signing them.

The fact that few people ever saw or heard about the outcome of the petition was raised. The exception was petitions directed in the local area where the success was visible.

> I've signed some petitions but they're just the ones on the Internet and I don't know whether they go anywhere. (Parent of dependent children, sustained action)

> How many people here would have signed petitions? I've signed dozens and dozens and I've never once heard the outcome of the petition. But I still keep signing them. [M: Why?] Because I read it… and if I agree with it I'll sign it in the hope that something happens. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

> I was rapt because yesterday morning they were digging the holes [for local traffic changes after a petition] (parent with dependent children, trial action)

In the two mini-groups of students, a surprising number of the students had been involved in petitions about their teachers.

> It [a petition against a teacher] was sort of nasty but then I realised that nothing is going to happen and everyone's going to be unhappy. We may as well try something to make it right even if it's just signing a petition and showing it to the principal. (Female teen)

The outcomes of these petitions varied and influenced perceptions of the effectiveness of this approach.

There was willingness to participate in this type of action, though there was a difference between instigating a petition and signing a petition. Community organisations should not only provide information about how to instigate and follow through on successful petition activism but also should look to provide support where possible to make the action a success. Feedback about the outcome is critical to reinforce the effectiveness of this approach.

Donating money & goods

Like signing a petition, donating money appears easy and painless, and therefore possibly an insufficient contribution. Even becoming a member of an organisation was likened to donating money because beyond a membership fee few participants become more heavily involved:

> I don't really want to be a member of Greenpeace. I'm happy to give them money, I'm a lazy member. Because I don't see myself sort of going down on boats (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

> Yeah, it makes me feel guilty. I think I should be a regular donor, it's terrible that I'm not. (Younger adult, trial action)

> If I read something that touches me like something in the paper or I see something on television… and they say you can send donations…if I do it straight away then I do it. If I don't do it straight away I'm just as likely to forget about it. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

> I used to have direct debit. I think it was for Greenpeace and Amnesty International when I was a student. I was a lot more compassionate then but [I'm] a bit lazier now. I changed banks and maybe subconsciously I thought that was a good excuse to not renew them. (Younger adult, trial action)

Many participants saw donations as wasteful if the funds were not reaching the heart of the problem. Trust of an organization was therefore considered critical. It may be easier to create a sense of trust when the donation is given to specific projects with visible outcomes rather than just general donation.

> We hand over the money and never find out where it goes to. (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

> I think it is easier to give money when you actually see the reward. (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

One participant discussed a donation of a different sort—blood donation. He responded to the blood bank's advertising that donations were desperately required, and was told that he would need to wait two weeks to get an appointment. The long wait called into question the honesty of the request for urgent donations.

Participants were also annoyed with the sheer number of charities requesting money. It was felt that being on a mailing list or responding to a request for donations would put you on a mailing list for other charities.

> You think if you give to all of them I'll end up a charity case myself. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator)

By contrast, a few people mentioned that donations of goods could be boosted by urging simple and regular behaviour changes, such as purchasing a can of food every week for deposit in a bin at the supermarket. Naturally the need and costs of this operation would need to be considered, however the opportunity is highlighted as an action that would resonate with people.

> Just buy an extra can and lob it in [the supermarket bin] on the way past. I mean you'll get more people doing that I think than will go out of their way to volunteer. (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

Public forum

There was a mixed reaction to the idea of attending a public forum. Participants said they would be willing to attend a public forum if it was an issue about which they were passionate, but this research showed that few people would be sufficiently motivated unless it was an issue personally affecting them.

Other participants weren't sure what would be gained from a public forum, which could be 'talk about talk' and not action-oriented. The presence of strangers was a barrier to younger Australians. In particular, the teenage boys felt the adults would not welcome them.

> Why would a teenager go to something like that, especially public forums, because they just don't fit in… [Adults would] probably freak out and leave. (Male teen)

> I don't think I would [attend a public forum] because there'd be a lot of people and a lot of rhetoric. (Younger adult, trial action)

On the other hand, some participants thought a public forum would be an interesting exercise, provided the discussion was fair and allowed people to discuss their different views. Being able to ask questions was a key appeal of this action.

> Both sides [need] to be able to look at it from the other side's point of view…To be able to see where the conflict is and try and lessen it. (Younger adult, trial action)

> [At] a public forum you've got the chance to stand up and ask a question directly and if they start to waffle … you can…press them a bit and just say, 'No, you haven't answered my question'. You can actually say something and get a direct response. (Younger adult, trial action)

Effort was the principal disadvantage of this type of involvement. When asked would they attend a forum, participants began to suggest the forum is televised! One participant suggested local government should hold regular open forums, revealing that there is still inadequate knowledge about the operation of local government and how residents can influence its decisions. This remains a challenge for local government and for social action in general.

While the notion of a public forum has some appeal in theory, there are practical obstacles, including inconvenience. It would be worthwhile exploring creative ways to get the benefits of this approach but minimise the difficulties. The public forum approach at present would appear to have greatest potential at a local government level with parents and older adults. Electronic communication such as chat rooms could be considered for younger audiences.

Private forum

Participants were responsive to the idea of presentations to organisations to which they already belong, such as sports clubs. They felt that time would be willingly given to representatives for causes that resonated with the group. For instance, a discussion with a sports club must have some relevance to that sporting club. Agencies must be creative in making ties with varied organisations about social issues.

Students had mixed thoughts about the value of talks and events at schools. Females were more positive than the male students who found talks boring. Other opportunities available at some schools, including visits by the Red Cross Blood Bank, were widely supported.

> We get the blood bank at my school and I know if we didn't then a lot of people wouldn't do it. It's just really convenient. It comes twice a year. (Female teens)

This research suggests that there are considerable opportunities available from approaching established organisations including schools. The process through which organisations are approached will need to be considered in great detail, as would the ongoing liaison role. It is likely that the most effective approach would be surrounding project specific tasks that are oriented in the local area.

Direct contact: The letter and the phone call

The letter was a favoured method of expressing one's views on an issue. In general, participants knew they could write to a newspaper, an organisation or an MP. For some, writing a letter presented an opportunity to vent anger and frustration. For a number of people, especially those with little experience with this form of action, a written letter was not expected to gain a response and the total impact was considered minimal. Students, in particular, thought that no one would care about what they would have to say given their age.

> You could send hate mail to Phillip Ruddock if you wanted to but he probably just chucks it all in the bin anyway. (Younger adult, sustained action)

> Say if we wrote a letter, who's going to really care? It's like a 16 or 17-year-old's opinion. No one's going to really care. Say if [a] Queen's Counsel wrote a letter it would be different, it would be noticed. (Male teen)

> I wouldn't know about how to write a letter so it would get past the secretary. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Others held the view that letters were of greater value than petitions and marches because they presented a more considered message.

> A politician not so long ago told me petitions aren't the real way to go because a lot of people sign them without reading them and politicians don't take much notice at all. Nor of any sort of form letter [template]… They will take notice of individual letters. (Older adult, sustained action)

> I suppose what we should be doing is writing letters to local governments... One person can represent 1000 people. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Some participants had written into and had been published in a newspaper. When asked how they felt about being published they had mixed feelings because they questioned what difference their comment would make or because the newspaper had vetted their comment. The teen boys referred to one private school that encouraged the students to write regularly to the newspapers; they believed the objective was to make the students more aware and involved in society. It was thought that this was generally a positive initiative and schools should be encouraging this activity, though because it was seen as extra work it did not generate resounding enthusiasm.

A lack of confidence appears to be one barrier to letter writing that could be targeted by community agencies. Kits and education sessions with step-by-step guides that encourage regular letter writing may be explored.

> [You've] got to be too intellectual or write too well for them to even publish it. (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

Though copying a 'template' letter would make the task much simpler, participants felt this, like signatures on a petition, would have less impact on the recipient. Participants supported the idea of letter writing with positive messages. The older sustained action group felt Australians tend to wait until something has happened and it's too late to praise the good work of others. Yet a letter to an MP congratulating them on the work they were doing might encourage further good work.

> We elect our parliament and we elect our council people and then all we do is criticise them. And we never say when they do something good like a bicycle track or a park. (Older adult, sustained action)

Another group suggested writing letters to respected journalists, requesting articles about a certain issue. This suggestion could be extended to offering positive feedback and comments to journalists for stories covering social issues.

> I read *The Age* almost every day and some of those reporters…you can tell…are well informed…Right now I'm thinking of just writing to them and asking them to investigate some of these issues. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator)

In addition to letter writing, phone calls to MPs and talk-back radio were mentioned. A handful of participants had tried to call a radio station to air their views:

> Well, there's a couple of issues I'd like to speak to Neil Mitchell about on 3AW, but you can't get through, I've tried several times. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

Making a phone call was somewhat more risky than a letter where the content could be planned and reviewed. Developing the skills and confidence of people making phone calls to journalists and decision makers would be another area where community agencies could target assistance to potential lobbyists.

Letter writing, and to a lesser extent making a phone call, were seen as relatively easy and effective means of expressing one's views and creating social change. A community mobilisation campaign should take advantage of people's willingness to use these forms of action and assist them to do so more effectively.

Volunteer time

Participants saw volunteer work as good and valuable work. People genuinely felt they would or should make time to be involved. For some participants who were involved in sustained action, a life without volunteering was inconceivable: 'I could never stay home and just do nothing, I just couldn't' (Older adult, sustained action).

Some students had been involved in 'volunteer' work as a compulsory activity through their school. They found this rewarding and felt that school should continue this practice.

Some of the barriers to volunteering have already been discussed, including concerns about the time and commitment that would be required. It is suggested that individuals are recruited to clearly defined projects that will maximise the potential to see change which will in turn encourage further activity.

> With [volunteering] you can actually see that you're helping people and they're grateful…. With the asylum seeker issue by writing a letter you can't actually see that it's doing anything. (Male teen)

Ensuring positive trial action experiences is essential. There would be few individuals like the older sustained action participants who would still pursue other volunteer avenues after being told they are not suitable for volunteer work by a leading charitable agency. One young female student had volunteered to work at an op shop but no one ever got back to her and she has not been involved in volunteer work as a result. Valuing all contributions regardless of extent and permitting flexibility in involvement

Offering opportunities to volunteer in the local community will make the benefits more personal and the task logistically easier. The popularity of events such as the 40 Hour Famine suggests that annual projects and novelty tasks would have great success for younger people, whilst older Australians will be more comfortable with regular involvement.

Shared experiences of poverty

The Brotherhood of St Laurence wanted to explore the association between people's own experiences of difficult life stages and the judgements made of others. To investigate this link, focus groups were shown photos of people who could be interpreted to be in disadvantaged situations in Australia. These pictures varied in age, gender and ethnicity and reflected the often deceptive and hidden state of financial poverty in Australia.

As discussed previously, compassion and empathy were drivers of involvement in action, and indeed many people responded to these pictures with a sense of sympathy:

> Look at their eyes. Look at the loss in them. (Older adult, sustained action).

However, two contrasting reactions were observed: on one hand people became focused on blame ('What did this person do to put themselves in an unfortunate position?'); on the other hand (and

less frequently), participants were concerned about maintaining the dignity of the individual by not presuming they were impoverished and by not forcing 'charity' upon them.

In general, the photos did not produce responses that seemed likely to lead to action. This was also true for the sustained action groups, who would not be motivated into action by stimulus material like this; they noted, however, that their reaction to real people—not pictures—might be different.

It can be concluded that for most of the focus group participants, seeing pictures of individuals in needy situations did not motivate them to assist. However, as participants were keen to gain further information about the individuals depicted, this does not rule out the potential effectiveness of case studies as highlighting human plight. This is an important insight that could help guide communications when using visuals representing situations of social concern.

> I would like to help some of these people… if they're fair dinkum because they need help and it's no skin off my nose to give them a few meals and a bed and stuff like that and give them a boost onwards. But who are you dealing with is the trouble. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

Even where a participant's own life experiences were perceived to be similar to the pictures, empathy was overwhelmed by the rational view that 'I got through it' and so could they. In fact, participants believed it would be easier for these individuals to survive difficult times, because of increased services and assistance for Australians in need.

In only a few cases was empathy the primary response and in these a close match between one's past experience and the perceived situation was essential:

> If you've ever been in that situation yourself… you just feel like you want to help them. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating).

In summary, motivating people by the use of pictures of individuals can be problematic because of concerns about blame and charity. On the other hand, if the cause becomes too broad, the action and outcome can become too elusive for a person to feel they can make a worthwhile contribution. Hence, a project-based approach would be a promising compromise. Participants would be more likely to work with an organisation because they believed that the experience of the organisation would enable it to identify those in genuine need: 'I think that's why you need to go to a well-run organisation' (Older adult, sustained action). Cultivating an organisational reputation for understanding and working at the heart of the problem will build confidence.

Responses to specific images of poverty

The pictures created a number of reactions, including sadness, sympathy and cynicism about the genuineness of the people's situation. Many participants were prompted by the photos to discuss experiences and stories they had been told of people begging for money who were 'con artists' or would spend the money on alcohol or drugs.

Most participants believed the pictures showed people they might see on the streets of Melbourne, though it was agreed these images were more frequent in the inner city.

People's initial sympathetic response was clearly connected to compassion for the subjects' perceived loneliness and need, rather than to a conscious connection with the participants' own experiences of difficulty. Because the photos did not prompt them to reflect on their own life experiences, the participants seemed more inclined to blame the subjects rather than to identify with the decisions that these people faced.

Few people could answer what they might have in common with the people in the pictures, beyond saying 'We're all people' and 'We're human'. One person felt they had more in common with the lady and child because they lived in a house shown in the background of the picture.

The people who were interpreted to be 'victims'—that is, not to blame for their situation—received the greatest sympathy. For instance, a young child was considered a victim while his mother was presumed to be a sole parent and the victim of a partner who had walked out. Participants felt

sympathy for elderly people because they were unable to support themselves or change their situation at this stage in life. An Asian lady was nominated by some as receiving their sympathy as she potentially faced language barriers. Other circumstances evoking sympathy included disability, mental illness and poor health.

> I tend to feel more sympathy with the very young and the very old because I think they're the most vulnerable. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

Issues of responsibility and choice

Participants moved rapidly from their initial emotional response to a more analytical approach to the photos. They cited a number of reasons that could create disadvantage. Commonly mentioned reasons included drugs, gambling, crime, poor financial decisions, a failed business and poor backgrounds. Participants struggled to empathise with the notion that people can get 'beaten by life' though it was regularly mentioned as a cause of ongoing disadvantage. They couldn't comprehend how a person could give up on life and not ask for help from welfare agencies.

> If this bloke [a homeless individual] came up to me on the streets ... you'd tell him just to go away, get a life and get a job. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

> I think initially you feel empathy but then you think, hang on, he's got this bottle of whisky and that's not my fault. (Female teen)

Some sustained action participants experienced frustration with helping those who they feel don't want to be helped:

> You do have empathy but empathy can sometimes turn to resentment when you're directly working with them (Younger adult, sustained action).

Choice was a critical word when these Australians talked about people in need. Though there are events beyond their control, people do have a choice about seeking help. The female teens regularly referred to these people as 'weak'.

> It makes me wonder. If I wouldn't do that why would someone else be that weak? (Female teen)

> It might be a matter of their choice. Some kids want to live on the streets. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplation)

> I'm not chaining these people to stay in this property and gamble at 4 o'clock in the morning. It's their choice, they can walk out any door, they can get help … so I can feel empathy for them but I can't feel sorry for them because it's their choice. (Younger adult, sustained action)

This is an important finding in how we address communications and respond to what appears to be a regular query from Australians. Community agencies will need to demonstrate that real choices are often limited, to eliminate a possible reason people don't become more actively involved in issues of disadvantage in Australia.

Though most participants were rational and rather impersonal in their judgement of these situations, some did make a personal connection, linking the desire for help back to their own needs:

> I don't know what their situation is, they could've put themselves there but… I've got compassion and I see this person is under all of this shit… I'd want someone to help me if that was me. (Younger adult, trial action)

Older participants felt education about wise use of money was lacking. The lack of 'life skills' was a theme mentioned in most groups, though it was stressed by older adults and parents. This may point to an opportunity to involve older Australians in assisting programs to build practical skills. This would create a possible link in the community and lead to improved understanding of structural causes of poverty and community cohesion.

> Now how do you help the poor people? You've got to try to help them, to educate them on how to survive. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

Vulnerability and poverty

Few people would describe the situation they saw in the images as 'poverty'. More apt descriptions were said to include 'disadvantaged people', those 'less fortunate' or 'unfortunate'. As discovered in the Understanding Poverty Project (2000) participants routinely associated the term 'poverty' with images of the third world. For instance, there was a brick house in the background of one picture and so the person depicted might be struggling but was not 'living in poverty':

> This is rich man's poverty. (Older adult, sustained action)

> They're living on hard times. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

It was agreed that poverty was not an appropriate word to describe those who are lonely or isolated. Rather poverty was linked to financial and material deprivation.

> You have to have the financial factor in the definition. These problems can occur to people who are well off and then you couldn't call it poverty. (Younger adult, sensitised/contemplating)

It is recommended that communications do not lead with the suggestion that poverty is characterised by loneliness or isolation, but rather this message would need to be introduced with more explanation and discussion.

Responses to statements and 'facts' about poverty

Reactions to a series of quotes and other 'facts' about poverty were used to build an understanding of how people process information about poverty and what approaches have the most meaning and impact on individuals. The responses are presented below, and are ordered from the most successful statement through to those that were not well received.

Many participants in the first instance questioned the validity of the statistics, particularly as some were assessed as being exaggerated. Accurate and supportable statistics are critical as the foundation for any community agency communications.

Most quotes elicited a reaction from participants. Some believed the statements were too extreme to be believable—surely they would see poverty more if it was so widespread– so their reaction was cynicism and denial. Other participants swallowed as they read the statements, or exclaimed, 'That's so sad!' (Male teen), indicating a deep emotional connection.

When asked which of the statements would prompt them to take follow-up action such as visiting a website or making a phone call, some participants were overwhelmed by the size of the problem to be solved. Others felt that some extra incentive would be required. From the other findings it can be assumed that presenting the problem in such a way that it impacts on the individual would be considered an incentive to action.

Stimulus: 'My asthma pills cost $110 and I just can't afford that, so I don't have them'

The most effective statement included references to health. People regarded limited access to health as a severe and structural problem:

> That is disgusting. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator).

> That seems unjust to me. That really stands out. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

> They're in terrible trouble if they can't get their pills. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

> Seems like a very hard society. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

> Yeah, and there's a lot of that and there is even arthritis pills out there, and all those poor old people suffering with arthritis. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplating)

Many people saw the quote about the asthma pills as very effective. Some questioned why the pills were so expensive given concession discounts, or why other treatments were not used.

> But isn't asthma medication on the national health, I thought it was. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

It can be concluded that statements related to health, when carefully selected, will have an impact on people: 'It would not take much effort for people to link this problem into their own lives and the lives of their family.

Stimulus: 'I can expect to die a violent death before I'm 40. That's what it means to be Indigenous in this country, the lucky country.'

This quote was generally effective across the age groups though it had greater effect and less resistance amongst younger participants. The comparison of life expectancy and living conditions drove the impact: 'Oh Jesus, that's terrible' (Male teen). This quote captured a sentiment that didn't seem real for the Australia they know: 'No it sounds very un-Australian …'

Several participants were confused by the use of the word 'violent': 'Violent death by road accident or something like that?'(Older adult, sensitised/contemplating). This word caused others to believe the quote was an exaggeration or didn't take into account causes for the state of Indigenous Australians.

> I didn't like the indigenous one because, well, we do give them a lot of money. (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

> That's a huge generalisation… I don't think Cathy Freeman is going to be dead. (Younger adult, trial action)

> I think the wrong word there is 'violent' because I don't believe they're all going to die a violent death. I think they're going to die of other means. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

While statements about comparative life expectancy certainly grab Australians' attention, they also provoke the question "Why?' Messages need to explain the reasons for the disadvantage of Indigenous Australians, to overcome misconceptions and gaps in people's knowledge.

Stimulus: For every school class of 28 kids, two will be living in poverty

Messages about education and children have been identified over the years to have high appeal because they side-step blaming the victim. This statistic conveyed the level of poverty as considerable among a group that is seen as victims: 'Two is too many' (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplator). The use of the classroom or playground context appears to be an effective way to present concepts and statistics relating to children and poverty.

This statement was refuted by some, because the geographic distribution of wealth means not all classrooms have two children living in poverty: 'Does that work in private schools too?' (Younger adult, trial action). The presentation of statistics needs to be carefully considered, so that people cannot easily dismiss the evidence of poverty in their community.

The use of the word poverty could also be a problem: as one participant asked, 'Whose definition of poverty' are we using? Use of alternative language such as disadvantage or by using specific behaviours such as going without breakfast may be an effective means around the 'poverty' word trap.

Stimulus: 'How would Australians feel if they knew that on average, for every 11 houses in your street tonight, one family will be going without dinner because that's how many live below the poverty line?'

The intention of this statement was to bring poverty into someone's own street and hence into their 'problem sphere'. It had some effect: 'Yeah, it does bring it down to a personal level and makes you think about your actual street' (Younger adult, trial action). One person described the other statements as abstract, but said that this statement introduced the idea of a home and so it stood out to him. It also captured a basic behaviour that many take for granted in Australia, the ability for all to eat a main meal.

> It surprised me that it was that much, you feel lucky that you can afford to eat every night. (Parent of dependent children, sustained action)

> I've never thought that people in my own street could be in poverty. (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

Many participants raised the issue that poor people didn't live in Toorak and so the impact was undermined: 'It's not literally one in 11 in Toorak' (Parent with dependent children, sustained action). If statements can be generated on a community by community basis the impact would be maximised. The poverty in surrounding community to the more affluent areas could be one method of making the impact of poverty proximal to all Australians.

Stimulus: 1.6 million or 11% of Australians now live in poverty

Participants spontaneously commented on this statement: they were surprised by the size of poverty in Australia. It did however lack the emotional appeal of some of the other statements. For this reason students felt this type of statement would suit a headline, with additional information provided below. By itself it was a bit stark.

> I'm surprised it's that high. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

> That's something to be concerned about. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

Some participants were overwhelmed by the extent of the problem that they hadn't previously considered. This was counter-productive to a call for action. Others wondered how they could not have noticed the extent of the problem and showed disbelief of the statistic.

> But I always question figures that I see in the paper because I mean they can adapt it to go either way. (Younger adult, trial action)

Others felt this called into question what is meant by the term poverty. It would be worthwhile testing this statement using the term 'disadvantaged' to see whether people have a similar questioning reaction. If a single word does not resonate with Australians then quite specific behaviour such as going without an evening meal could be trialled. Overall, it appears that sweeping statistical statements need to be substantiated and expressed in everyday language.

Stimulus: For every job vacancy there are 8 people who are unemployed

This statement was moderately effective in prompting a reaction though the discussion it generated was focused on it's the statement's credibility and whether the eight people who were unemployed actually wanted work. Some felt that if someone wanted to work in Australia they could and so this statement created unresolved confusion.

> You meet someone who says, 'Geez, I can't get a job. Five years of being unemployed and I can't get a job'—well that's bullshit. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Others who had been touched by unemployment were more sympathetic.

> You'd look in the paper, when I started working there would be three pages of jobs for what I do. Now, [whereas] there might be six, seven jobs [then] ... there's no jobs out there. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

This is a useful audience to involve, as these people can relate their own experiences. Other audiences who are more distrusting of statistics and reasons for unemployment who must be convinced that the unemployment problem is genuine.

Stimulus: 'I've had days when I've gone without food to feed the kids'

This quote received quite a few spontaneous reactions from participants though they were often quite cynical: participants questioned why the parent didn't have enough money. Many raised the possibility that people could not feed their children because of drug, alcohol or gambling addictions. It was also suggested, in a less damning manner, that parents lack knowledge of how to stretch payments to cover all living expenses. Finally, a number of older participants indicated that their parents had also gone without food some nights to feed their family and sometimes it was just what had to be done.

With some people this statement did resonate, making them think about being in a situation where they didn't eat. They could relate to the stress of this situation and regarded it as unfair. If not for the cynical comments from others this would have been a very successful approach. It is suggested that this kind of message be combined with some explanation of why the person is short of money—for example, because of low welfare payments or harsh breaches penalties.

The wording of the statement could also be reviewed, as a few people misread it: 'You don't feed your kids, that's terrible.' (Parent with dependent children, trial action).

Stimulus: Could you live on less than $200.50 a week?

This statement invited people to consider how they would manage living on *less than* a quarter of average male weekly earnings—the level which the Brotherhood of St Laurence is advocating as a minimum for single unemployed Australians. (As some participants noted, the actual rate of Newstart payments at the time of the research was $185.00 per week).

As a way to challenge people's understanding of poverty, the question had mixed results amongst participants in all age groups. One's living situation was seen as a major factor in determining whether this amount was sufficient. Teens struggled to determine how much income a person needed: generally they thought $200.50 would be satisfactory if that didn't have to cover rent. Older groups felt people who owned their own home or were living at home could get by on this amount. Others suggested that in shared housing this amount would be sufficient also.

Though feedback was mixed, those who felt they could survive acknowledged that this amount would exclude luxuries. Sensible purchasing of cheap foods, not smoking, drinking or gambling and eliminating entertainment such as going to the movies and eating out would be essential. Living long-term on this amount would be difficult.

> You can't live like that forever, without luxuries. (Female teen)

It was those individuals who have survived lean times, and those who still do, who had the least sympathy for those on this allowance: 'It's not easy but I budget and work hard… I still save money.' (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

To avoid a discussion of what amount of money a person could live on it is recommended that messages should include a long-term perspective, e.g. Could you live on less than $200.50 a week for the next 104 weeks? Alternatively, the statement could be rephrased to be 'Would you want to live on $200.50 a week? This might highlight the restrictions of low income, instead of testing the audience's budgeting skills.

Stimulus: The top 10% of Australians own 52% of Australia's wealth. The poorest 50% own 3% of Australia's wealth

This statement received mixed reactions. The percentages distracted some participants:

> That just confused me. There were too many statistics in the first sentence. (Male teen).

Others read the statement and thought 'That'll be right'. Though the inequality of wealth distribution annoyed them, they seemed resigned to it.

A smaller proportion of participants read the statement with interest and were either shocked by the extent of unequal distribution or was already aware of the situation and were angry about it. This was not a fair Australia. Few participants knew what they could personally contribute to correct the situation.

> Such a small percentage of the population own so much! (Younger adult, sustained action)

It is surprising that this statement didn't receive a stronger emotional response despite the use of 'too many numbers', as equality of wealth distribution was identified in the Understanding Poverty (2000) to be a major concern of Australians. The findings from this study should not be taken to dismiss equality as a useful approach. The suggestion of viable and effective actions that people can take to address inequality in Australia may be one means of translating disappointment and anger into action.

Stimulus: Pensions and social security payments are very low in Australia, often 20-30% below the poverty line

Only a handful of people understood this statement and responded positively . The majority reported the language used as a barrier to comprehension. For instance, the term 'poverty line' raised several questions about 'what is the poverty line?' A few people made spontaneous comments that the poverty line was too high.

> I don't get it though… below the poverty line? (Female teen)

> I just wondered what is the poverty line. (Younger adult, pre-contemplators)

> Oh yeah, but that's the poverty line here, I don't reckon it's that low. (Younger adult, trial action)

In general, people had difficulty connecting benefit payments with the concept of a poverty line. The statement was a distraction from the aim of informing Australians about welfare payments.

Stimulus: If one person in Australia is poor, then all of us are poorer

This statement was poorly received because it was too abstract. Few people could conceptually think of 'poor' and 'poverty' beyond material terms. Most dissected this statement in terms of how one economically disadvantaged person would economically disadvantage all Australians. For instance, the teenagers started thinking that if a wealthy person became poor then Australia would be financially disadvantaged.

> Not sure what it even means, to be perfectly honest, if one person in Australia is poor...
> (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

> If one person is poor, why should everyone have to be poorer than that person. (Male teen)

Only a handful could grasp what the statement was alluding to:

> Well, we're not doing our job. If we've got one poor person, we should be helping them.'
> (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

These abstract, philosophical views may be more effectively introduced in personal interactions when they can be explained.

Government policy making and a vision for Australia

Policy in Australia

Participants were given the opportunity to decide Australia's budget allocation across 15 pre-determined spending areas. Participants found this exercise to be difficult, complicated by a lack of

knowledge about each policy area. They also thought that the task would have been easier if they had the allocations from the previous budget to guide them. Participants expressed an interest to see how their budget compared with the federal budget, though they expected their efforts would differ considerably from the government's actual plans.

Participants were given the opportunity to add spending priorities that they thought were missing. Only two participants used this option, one to include youth issues such as depression and the other to add support for retirees.

The data was collected as a proportion of total expenditure. The allocations were averaged across all groups and are presented in the table below:

Proposed budget allocations (averages)		
Policy area	**%**	**%**
Education: public	14.3	>10%
Health: public..	14.1	
Social welfare: aged pensions..........................	8.4	8-10%
Social welfare: assistance to unemployed.......................	8.4	
Environment..	8.2	
Defence	7.7	6-8%
Justice: police..	7.1	
Child care..	6.3	
Health: private..	4.6	4-6%
Government administration	4.3	
Justice: refugees..	4.0	
Industry assistance	3.5	<4%
Sports & leisure	3.1	
Education: private..	3.0	
Arts	2.8	
Sample size: 92.		

Public education and health were the clear priorities set aside by participants. The verbal feedback received from this task almost unanimously emphasised these two categories. Though social welfare areas also appear to do quite well in terms of the proportion of the budget received they were infrequently mentioned when people talked about the exercise. This suggests that welfare is considered an essential but not noteworthy spending area. Rather participants used comments about public education and health to springboard into a discussion about why private education and private health don't deserve a high level of funding.

The environment also received a noteworthy proportion of the budget and remained infrequently mentioned by participants. In contrast, defence and police, which scored lower than welfare and the environment, were discussed quite frequently.

Receiving less 'hypothetical' budget money were the arts, private education and sports and leisure. Verbally, it was the arts, sports and leisure and government administration that were identified as being less important areas:

> I love sport but why give to them when you can give to public health or education. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating).

Vision for Australia

An open-ended discussion was conducted in the concluding minutes of the focus group discussions to allow participants to reveal their vision for Australia's future. They were asked what country would they like Australia to be, for themselves, for their parents, siblings and children and friends. This discussion, along with the policy exercise, will allow the community agencies to identify the key areas of concern for Australians and thereby highlight opportunities to improve the quality of life in Australia.

Areas central to Australians' vision for Australia included:

- a safe nation
- support of education and assistance for the youth
- social changes including a tolerant society
- development as an independent nation
- guaranteed access to quality health and aged care
- environmental restoration and preservation.

A safe nation

Safety was frequently the first or second point mentioned by participants. Unlike education which participants believed was generally good, participants were concerned about current and prospective domestic safety in Australia.

> I want to feel safe when I walk on the street. Walk down that ramp at the station and across the street, you just want to feel safe. (Older adult, sustained action)

> What kind of gets me is all these gangs and suburbs and stuff. It's just stupid. (Male teen)

Participants had a number of suggestions which they believed would build a safer country. These suggestions included more police and harsher penalties for offenders. Participants were also keen to have a justice system that treats all Australians as equals. It was thought there was favouritism of the rich and people with connections to those working in justice.

People focused on domestic security, however there were some lingering concerns since the September 11 attacks. Some older participants were concerned about Australia's neighbours given cultural differences and population size and felt international defence should be improved to deter future threats. Older groups proposed military training for the unemployed to build military capacity and address youth unemployment—mostly as an optional program, though some did favour compulsory training.

Participants also explored preventative measures through which safety in Australia could be improved. Education, family support and assistance for those with drug or gambling problems were all suggested as a means of creating a safe and happy nation.

There seemed to be an absence of trust of others which undermined a belief in and willingness to fight for a safe Australia. One male teen was concerned about gangs and violence. He felt that he couldn't rely on others to carry out their responsibilities. The issue of human rights and responsibilities was subtle and though people didn't use this language, the themes resonated with some participants.

In the in-depth interviews many participants believed that children were becoming preoccupied with their rights and lacked an understanding of their responsibilities to others. Advocating for education about human rights, responsibilities and civic contribution is highlighted as a possible role for the sector. The development of a program that could be implemented by teachers or by a community worker within schools is a possibility if there is sufficient sector interest in fostering a sense of community and contribution.

> It's time to educate people to live differently. Live a bit more like we were in the old days, trust each other... (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating).

Support of education and assistance for youth

The education system was identified as a critical mechanism for the development of a preferred Australia. It was felt that an effective education system would address many of the problems in society including drugs and crime. Education was regarded as a foundation for happy and stable lives.

> I want to see a huge improvement in education, especially public education because everything starts there ... you get a really good education and you get encouragement to go out and do something you'll make something of yourself. (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

Most participants actually believed Australia's current education was relatively good. However, because of the importance of this developmental period it must remain a focus for ongoing improvement. Suggestions for improvement including smaller class sizes, improved resources, more teachers, and improved training and incentives to ensure quality teachers.

Education, though a large contributor to happy and safe children, was insufficient without healthy family units. A culture where parents are not always working but spend time with their children was endorsed.

One young teen commented, however, that young Australians can't expect to be handed happiness: they need to take responsibility for making themselves happy also. The students had advice on how to gain their support—don't say something is bad. Rather parents and teachers should learn to express thoughts in a more open and reflective manner, or alternatively lead by example. The sector must be mindful of this lesson in its own communications.

Social changes including a tolerant society

A number of issues were raised relating to social and cultural change, including an equal society and one not focused on materialism and consumerism. The issue of tolerance raised some diverse views about the type of country people want Australia to be and how values from different cultures coexist in a multi-cultural community.

An equal society

Equality was mentioned, though it could not be said to be a strong theme. It was raised in relation to the distribution of wealth, as individuals wanted a more equal society:

> We used to be egalitarian but that's now changing. The gap between the rich and poor is widening. (Younger adult, sensitised/contemplating)

Some participants were resigned to an unequal society and did not see how they could change the situation.

Emphasis on 'the right things'

As discussed extensively in the in-depth interviews, participants were concerned about the cultural direction of Australia, which they perceived as moving to a highly materialistic and selfish society. They felt that Australians were holding the wrong things, such as money, and the wrong people, such as sports personalities, in esteem.

> We need to stop saying that just because a company is profitable it's a good company. (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

> I think we hold the wrong people in esteem … there's a restaurateur in Sydney who's spent millions of dollars on one of these soup kitchens… Now he is just fantastic and then we go and make Doug Hawkins father of the year. (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Tolerance

Mixed feedback was received in relation to the issue of a tolerant society. Some participants wanted a tolerant, open-minded country where other cultures and people were welcomed and accepted:

> The whole idea of it being a cultural melting pot … you get so much exposure to different cultures, different ways of life. (Younger adult, sensitised/contemplating)

This thought was extended to the status of Indigenous Australians. One teen went to a forum about Indigenous Australians and she felt more open-minded after that forum. She felt education would assist Australia to become a more open-minded place.

Another group of participants was concerned about the values of other cultures that we would be welcoming into Australia. Tolerance of other cultures may compromise the type of society people want to live in and thus for many their vision of the future is one where the culture of Australia is controlled by immigration.

> Female circumcision and all, who wants people like that in the country—I don't—awful, barbaric people. (Older adult, sensitised/contemplating)

> [Iraqi Australians] are doing sacrificing of sheep in the backyard. The wife walks down the road and so her husband goes across, rips her veil off and gives her a hiding in front of everyone in the street, because he can. That's the Australia I don't want. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

Development as an independent nation

The desire to be a separate and independent nation—a reaction against a perceived trend to being like the United States —came through quite strongly in the in-depth interviews and to a slightly lesser extent in the focus group discussions. In particular there were concerns that Australia would become flashy, serious and lose its sense of humor.

Participants from the focus group discussions expressed an interest in Australia becoming more self-sufficient and a leader in areas such as health and innovation:

> More independent and tough when it comes to overseas markets I don't want to see Australia being bullied, which it is. (Parent with dependent children, trial action)

> I mean I like hearing on the news when they say Australian scientists have made another breakthrough. (Younger adult, sustained action)

Guaranteed access to quality health and aged care

This was important to participants, especially the parents and older people. It was emphasised in the policy exercise and was restated verbally in their vision for Australia. People thought health and aged care would need attention given the ageing demographic of Australia. Access to care and provision of resources and incentives for nurses and doctors were critical.

Environmental restoration and preservation

The environment was discussed by surprisingly few participants in the focus group discussions although it emerged quite strongly in the in-depth interviews. It seemed that people understood and accepted that the environment should be protected but that they were distracted from efforts in this direction. The interviewees alluded to a concern that when business and the environment go head to head on issues, business always wins. This captured a materialist sentiment that participants were keen to see changed:

> Once the environment is gone where are we all? It's getting better though—we're certainly a lot more aware than we have been in the past and certainly we need to be doing more... (Younger adult, sustained action)

> I want us to take care of our environment. (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

Litter was a key concern among the in-depth interviewees, whilst water quality and quantity was referred to in the focus group discussions. One younger group saw public transport as important because it allowed access to services and the CBD while they still enjoyed the wide open spaces of outer Melbourne.

Achieving the ideal Australia

In the interviews and focus group discussions participants were asked how their ideal Australia would be achieved. There was a good understanding that, beyond government, 'ordinary' Australians are responsible for achieving the future they desire. Yet a number of people expressed cynicism and distrust about Australians' willingness to unite in the quest for a better society. For instance, the young pre-contemplators felt that people who are dishonest and cheat Australian systems are the winners, whilst those doing the right things lose out. They wondered what incentive is there to do the right thing? Others commented that the 'rich aren't doing enough'.

Other participants felt there were basic differences in opinions about what was desirable in Australia, and for this reason Australians could not unite.

Voting was discussed as a means for Australians to influence the direction of the country. A few participants felt their voting was sufficient civic contribution. Other participants were concerned that voting simply wasn't enough power to create change.

> I think we have no choices really, because I feel like I have no sense of choice about where to go to vote, I can't go, 'Well, if I go with the Democrats then they'll support my issues or disagreement or whatever'. (Parents with dependent children, sustained action)

> What might stop my vision of the future is a government out of control and trying to control our lives and make us safe in the name of fighting terrorism. (Younger adult, pre-contemplator)

> It's funny because so often politicians will stand up and say, 'I'm doing this not because the voters say so, I'm doing it on principle and it's the right thing'. Then other times they go, 'Well, it's what the majority of voters want, it's democracy'. I suppose what I'm saying is that they [politicians] take democracy when they want it, but they don't always hold the values true to themselves. (Younger adult, trial action)

One parent questioned why the public could not be consulted on large issues such as stem cell issues. While formal voting may be too expensive a proposition, confidence in government decisions on these issues may grow if it is published that the population is polled on major issues. Establishing a common location, possibly online, would facilitate the lines of communication with Government.

> Lots of people feel disenfranchised with the whole [government] system, they don't particularly understand it, don't see the role of an individual in it. (Parent with dependent children, sustained action)

> Sometimes I feel we should actually revolt as a group like they did in Europe many years ago, you know … As a community as a whole...I sometimes feel 'Why don't we all just revolt and make them listen?'... I said…. we just take it, we just do. (Parent with dependent children, pre-contemplating)

Comparison to other studies

The Middle Australia Project conducted by Pusey (1998) explored concerns about Australian society. Consumerism, greed, breakdown of community and social life, pressure on families, parents, marriages and workload were nominated as principle concerns. This study also found a perception that living standards were falling. Overall, however, participants were happy with general lifestyle features such as equality and freedom in Australia.

A study by Braithwaite (1998) suggests highly stable value consensus in Australia over time. In 1995 the top ranking values (supported by 95 per cent of those surveyed) were human dignity, a world at peace, the rule of law, freedom, equal opportunity for all and preserving the natural environment. In 1975 the same values had been endorsed, with the addition of national security.

A study of Australia's youth and their expectations for the future revealed a preference for less emphasis on the individual, competition and material wealth, and more emphasis on community, family, cooperation and the environment (Eckersley 1995).

These studies, in addition to other National Social Science Survey findings, confirm that with respect to important general values and visions for Australia, little has changed across time. This does not mean that specific opinions have not altered. For example, while the value of tolerance remains unchanged, specific opinions on gender roles and homosexuality have altered.

Other observations

Comments on poverty

The discussions were deliberately directed away from a narrow discussion of poverty to avoid restricting the conversation to social concerns. When poverty was raised, as it was in the use of photos and statements, it was quite clear that views discovered in the Understanding Poverty Project were re-emerging—that is many people don't believe *real* poverty exists in Australia. Where the existence of disadvantage, as opposed to absolute poverty, was more widely accepted, a discussion about responsibility and blame emerged. Poverty as a topic had little relevance for participants, as highlighted in a comment made after watching a short news report about the working poor: 'I wonder why they were putting the topic of poverty under the spotlight.' (Older adult, trial action)

Reactions to the statements in the focus group discussions reinforces the notion that poverty as a topic creates confusion for many because they simply don't see poverty around them. The in-depth interviews taught us that surprise could be a helpful tool if surprising information is backed up with evidence and people are given an opportunity to see that poverty exists and how it affects their lives. The in-depth interviews also suggested creative links of poverty to other issues as a subtle introduction to this concern.

It is recommended that examples of poverty, including case studies and statistics, are specific to communities. Using the word 'poverty' presents a distraction from the actual issue and so the development of a social barometer or presenting poverty in simple terms such as meals, health and education would resonate better. Answering why there is poverty will be the next major issue, since there is a tendency for Australians to blame the individual. Case studies and a simple explanation of the structural causes of poverty should be provided. Information should be factual and opportunities to assess alternative views provided such that community organisations are viewed as providing fair coverage of issues. Solutions are essential and they should be simple and focus on outcomes.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence

At the conclusion of the discussion participants were informed that the Brotherhood of St Laurence was conducting this research to develop a better understanding of whether and how Australians want to be involve in social action and what areas people would want to be involved. Participants were told that this information would inform a National Campaign the Brotherhood of St Laurence had received private trust funding to conduct over the next three years. When asked how the participants would like to see the Brotherhood of St Laurence using its resources, education was highlighted:

> I would hope that education would be the main priority… You mentioned the poverty line, what is it? (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Others confessed that their knowledge of what the Brotherhood of St Laurence does and current solutions to address Australian poverty was so limited that they were unable to make suggestions:

> I must admit I wouldn't know a lot what people do [at the Brotherhood of St Laurence] …
> so it's a bit hard for us to say what we'd like you to do because you might already do it.
> (Parent with dependent children, sensitised/contemplating)

Clearly there is scope for organisations like the Brotherhood of St Laurence to make their responses to poverty, both in service delivery and in social action and advocacy, more widely known.