



# Rebuilding Social Support Networks in Small & Emerging Refugee Communities

2008

***'We make strong our foundation to help ourselves'***

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## Acknowledgements

In completing this report we would like to thank the many communities that gave up their time and allowed us into their space by participating in this project. The understanding provided by sharing sometimes very personal experiences was taken with respect and thanks. We hope that the outcomes from the research will lead to better settlement experiences and a greater role for refugee communities within their own as well as the broader community.

Special mention must also be given to the volunteer contribution of Peta Temouskos and Ildephonse Kinyango in the development and implementation of the research.

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## Executive Summary

Independent community structures are the social fabric of communities providing strength, social interaction and contributing to identity and place within the broader community. Support networks act as key coping and survival mechanisms particularly during times of hardship. Re-establishing community structures during the settlement process however can be complex, impacted by factors such as loss of community members, dispersed settlement and lack of resources including language. The fact that emerging communities have re-established community support structures despite these barriers and largely independently of formal support indicates that there are inherent strengths and capacities from which we can learn.

This study highlights the importance of community support networks and the extent to which they provide much of the informal settlement support and social connections necessary to achieve successful settlement outcomes. To improve the sustainability and long-term outcomes for small and isolated refugee communities, greater support to strengthen internal structures and develop connections across communities is needed. In order to facilitate this process, the way in which social infrastructures are impacted by the settlement experience requires further analysis and was an aim of this research.

Emerging refugee communities have made extensive efforts to re-establish community support structures within a new and complex context. Inherent strengths within emerging refugee communities have enabled the rebuilding process to occur. In addition this research aimed to identify community skills in order to enhance the strength-base of emerging refugee communities and to transfer this learning to other communities.

Communities involved in the research included the Burundian, Rwanda, Liberian, Sierra Leone, Sudanese and Iraqi. Language groups included Acholi, Nuer, Dinka, Acholi, Mhadi, Creol, Mindy, Gio, Kirundi, Kinyarwanda and Arabic. Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted largely with community members living in the City of Whittlesea yet others included Darebin, Maribyrnong and Dandenong. One community member declined to take part in the research indicating that he had participated in many consultations without community benefit being realised. This raises the need to think clearly about the aim and ethical framework of research with refugee communities, ensuring there are tangible community outcomes.

While settlement difficulties and barriers were identified throughout the research, overall there was an overwhelming sense of improved life outcomes and opportunities available in Australia. In terms of capacity to rebuild social support networks, it was found that loss of family and friends had the greatest impact, particularly for women and young people. Loss of key family members impacted on family roles within the settlement context and reduced women's capacity in particular to participate in education and employment. Older generations were strongly linked to the maintenance of culture and ethnic identity and to the guidance of young people, who were cited as the future of communities. Family separation therefore increased the importance of community support networks.

Community consultations highlighted that a range of support networks had been established within the settlement context. Community support networks were fluid, gave voice to women and young people, developed appropriate governance structures, encouraged volunteering and developed financial supports independent of government contributions, indicating that refugee communities have a high level of diverse skills. Recognising these strengths and providing opportunities to share skills and experiences with other communities is important. This will ensure that integration is based on mutual understanding, equity and community partnerships.

A range of community strengthening strategies was identified by participants who knew the barriers needed to be overcome in order to enhance community capacity and sustainability. These strategies included:

- Enhancing family reunion, particularly for single parents
- Maintaining ethnic identity, as internal strength increases capacity to integrate
- Establishing accessible and community- owned venues for refugee, migrant and mainstream communities to come together
- Facilitating dialogue and learning across communities, increasing understanding and community cohesion
- Providing linkages to mainstream participation opportunities and addressing barriers such as child-care and transport
- Further exploring the range and level of skills that exist within refugee communities in order to develop and integrate skills more broadly, particularly economically
- Working with communities and families to develop initiatives that support young people, the future leaders of refugee communities as well as the mainstream community
- Providing greater opportunity for emerging refugee communities to have their diverse voices heard and to identify and address their own needs
- Exploring how mainstream organisations and communities can learn from and adapt the processes and supports refugee communities have put in place.

These strategies will ensure that social support structures continue to be the foundation and source, of strength for refugee communities into the future and lead to greater independence and settlement outcomes for small and emerging refugee communities. Our role in working with refugee communities is to build on these strengths in order to develop capacity and sustainability.

## Background

Small and emerging migrant and refugee communities experience particular settlement barriers due to limited or no previous migration history in the country of settlement. This impacts on the ability to seek support from more established community members, reducing access to informal and culturally and linguistically appropriate support networks. Small and emerging refugee communities, currently settling in areas such as Whittlesea, are experiencing significantly greater settlement difficulties than previously. This is related to extensive periods of displacement, forced relocation and entrenched issues of trauma. These experiences have had several significant impacts on the settlement of new and emerging refugee communities. In particular, support networks and the social fabric of communities have been severely disrupted, heightening the sense of isolation within the new settlement context.

Establishing internal community connections provides a key coping and survival mechanism for small and emerging communities, particularly when language, cultural and religious barriers are apparent. Reforming independent community structures provides strength, support and social interaction, particularly important for isolated community members. These networks also contribute to the social, cultural and political make-up of communities, helping to form identity and place within the wider mainstream community.

Re-establishing community structures during the settlement process can be a complex and on-going process, impacted by several external and uncontrollable factors. These factors include loss of valuable support networks, dislocation, dispersed settlement and a lack of resources that are available and accessible in the local community.

Loss of family, elders and key community members impacts on the knowledge, leadership and guidance available within refugee communities to manage a range of issues including conflict, family relationships and internal politics. The ability to resolve issues is made more difficult due to the fragmentation of families, as a result of both the refugee and migration experiences. This restructuring impacts on the support available, that is culturally and linguistically appropriate, within refugee families and communities.

Dispersed settlement across Australia creates additional barriers in rebuilding and maintaining internal community support networks. However anecdotal evidence highlights that, refugees from small and emerging communities, travel widely and across municipal borders in order to connect with other community members. This indicates that small and emerging refugee communities undertake great efforts to maintain community links and the need to do this is made more acute exactly because of their small and emerging nature. Women, women with children and the elderly may however face additional barriers in accessing support through such dispersed networks.

Re-establishing community structures in rapidly expanding municipalities such as Whittlesea are particularly difficult due to additional pressure placed on existing resources. Communities' capacity to establish and maintain support structures and community initiatives are severely impacted by access issues such as transport, child-care and available meeting space. Without addressing these barriers hard to reach and isolated community members remain disengaged from community participation opportunities, particularly within the mainstream.

Despite these barriers, small and emerging refugee communities have re-established community support structures to varying degrees, and are involved in an on-going process of expanding, strengthening and consolidating these networks. This rebuilding strategy is integral to managing the settlement process for new arrivals and indeed, for the very survival of refugee communities. The fact that emerging communities have largely achieved this

independently of formal support highlights this inherent strength. In order to build the capacity and strength of refugee communities and to increase connections to multicultural and mainstream communities, greater support however is required. This is particularly the case in light of the severity and level of community disruption pre and post- migration to Australia.

To enhance the sustainability and improve long-term settlement outcomes for small and isolated refugee communities, greater support to strengthen internal support structures and develop connections across communities is needed. In order to facilitate this process, the way in which social infrastructures are impacted by the settlement experience needs further analysis. Providing an opportunity for refugee communities to identify their own support needs will lead to the development of more appropriate and relevant community strengthening strategies.

## Project Aims

Despite pre- migration experiences that have dismantled community structures and the social participation barriers refugees face in the new settlement context, refugee communities have re- established support networks at local and regional levels in some way. Identifying and enhancing the strengths and skills within refugee communities that have enabled this to occur are integral to the sustainability of these networks. This research project aims to identify these skills in order to enhance the strength- base of emerging refugee communities. It also aims to identify ways in which we can learn from the refugee communities about the priorities they place on support structures and community needs.

This project will identify how local refugee communities are currently coming together and how supports structures have been established within the new settlement context. The impact of the settlement process on emerging community support networks will be explored.

In particular, the impact of factors, such as the loss of valuable support networks, dispersed settlement and barriers to accessing mainstream opportunities will be discussed. The strengths within communities that enable networks to endure despite these factors and barriers will also be highlighted.

The findings of this research project will be used to support small and emerging refugee communities, to build on what they are already doing, that is, by rebuilding and strengthening community support structures. Strategies that enhance the skill base of refugee communities provide access to resources and opportunities and improve the inclusion and participation of refugee communities will be identified. These strategies will ensure that social support structures continue to be the foundation and source of strength for refugee communities into the future. Our role in working with refugee communities is to build on these strengths in order to develop capacity and sustainability.

# Literature Review

## **Introduction**

This literature review will briefly discuss refugee experiences, focusing on social support networks and how they are maintained and redeveloped in flight and resettlement. It will also discuss definitions of support networks in several contexts and the benefits of these networks in improving settlement outcomes. This will identify gaps in the literature and highlight areas for further consideration.

## **The Refugee Experience**

Displacement is the process, either official or unofficial, of people being involuntarily moved from their homes because of war, government policies, or other societal actions (CHGS n.d). This requires groups of people to find new places to live, resulting in multi-dimensional stress, including physiological, social and cultural. In order to create some sense from this experience people attempt to relocate the familiar and recreate their lost community. This is particularly the case when the environment is hostile and unsympathetic to refugee needs (Seteney 1993). The focus of migrants and refugees on recovering their community, physically or socially, means that special attention must be given to the role of social connections such as family and community members in managing experiences of displacement, migration and settlement (Seteney 1993).

The need to recover community is highlighted by Hyden's (1983) concept, 'economy of affection'. According to Hyden the economy of affection may be considered an alternative economy that fulfils an extremely important welfare function. Hyden highlights the value of personal relationships and support structures, 'for survival in the absence of any institutional structures' (Hyden 1983). Indeed the breakdown of the state increases the importance of

social networks that is heightened in situations of displacement. In the absence of any material assistance from institutional structures, the economy of affection as a support network is of the utmost importance to the refugees' survival (Hyden 1983).

### **Social Inclusion**

Social relationships and connections are the fabric of and have important functions in most societies. The importance of social connections has been extensively identified particularly from health perspectives. Social networks and social ties have beneficial effects on mental health outcomes, including stress, anxiety, depression and psychological wellbeing (Kawachi & Berkman 2001). People who participate in community activities and can access help when needed are healthier and feel more positive about the communities in which they live (DVC 2004). Greater levels of community participation, social support and trust in others in the community have been associated with reduced experience of psychological distress (Berry & Rickwood 2000). Meaningful social and community participation and involvement is evidently related to positive health status.

Support networks, social support and support groups play an important role in facilitating positive settlement outcomes for new arrivals. Support networks are often a starting point for rebuilding links or sources of support. Established support networks provide meaningful links to other community members, information and resources that support access to other opportunities (House et al 1988). Support networks also provide meaningful opportunities for social exchanges and contribute to identity formation for members that belong to the network (Willems 2003).

### **Social Exclusion**

The lack of personal connections and support networks can have significant impacts for personal and community survival within the refugee context. While much of the literature

focuses on social exclusion within settled communities, the risk factors are evident and made more complex for refugees and new arrival communities in resettlement.

Social exclusion has been associated with a range of adverse health and well being impacts. For instance, young people reporting poor social connectedness are between two and three times more likely to experience depressive symptoms compared with peers who have greater social connectedness (Glover et al. 1998). Studies have consistently demonstrated that people who are socially isolated or disconnected from others have between two and five times the risk of developing fatal health complications compared to those who maintain strong ties with family, friends and community (Berkman & Glass 2000). The link between social exclusion, ill health and social isolation has been linked to unhappiness, illness and poor health.

Baum's study on suburban Australia identified that levels of participation in social and civic activities were significantly influenced by socio economic status with a relative lack of involvement of people with low income and education levels (Baum 2000). New arrival refugee communities arrive with very few resources and financial security and have varied educational experiences including disrupted and no formal education. Factors that influence economic disadvantage create additional barriers for other participation opportunities, increasing risk and experience of social exclusion. It is clear then that new arrival refugee communities face far greater risk of social exclusion.

Social exclusion is heightened in communities that are 'closed' to new arrival communities and where opportunities to engage with diversity are limited. A recent VicHealth study, *More than Tolerance: Embracing Diversity for Health* (2007), found that significant proportions of Victorians hold attitudes which may manifest in discriminatory behaviour and undermine health and wellbeing. Of particular concern are the more than one in three Victorians who identified cultural or ethnic groups they believed do not fit into Australian society (VicHealth 2007). In the

face of discrimination and racism small and emerging refugee communities face particular barriers that not only prevent social inclusion and participation but also have long- term social and political implications.

The refugee experience within the settlement context creates a number of risk factors that contribute to the social exclusion of emerging refugee communities from the wider mainstream community and the opportunities it has to offer.

### **Social Inclusion and Settlement**

New and emerging communities experience a range of barriers settling to a new country. Factors such as awareness and understanding by the mainstream community, language, lack of interpreters in emerging languages, limited or no access to services prior to migrating and financial hardship create additional stress in the initial settlement period (Hugman 2004). Despite these barriers refugee communities have achieved settlement outcomes largely independent of mainstream support, suggesting that informal support structures are still operating in some way. This indicates that a strong sense of community identity and self-reliance provides much of the resilience within refugee communities.

However the refugee experience of displacement significantly contributes to the loss of internal community support systems. The loss and destruction of social support networks exacerbates the difficulties faced by refugee communities within the new settlement context, as new arrivals need to manage unfamiliar social and physical environments without appropriate support mechanisms in place. People within communities therefore experience additional stress, as they try to rebuild new processes, practices and procedures into their lives. Guerin & Guerin 2007 point out that these topics are in themselves topics for research and suitable for developing interventions.

Research on social networks and the consequences of their absence have been broadly presented, however these studies have not been specific to emerging communities within a settlement context. There has been some analysis of the role of social networks in refugee situations, although much of the literature addresses the benefits of social networks and the impact of the lack of access to social connections. Further research into emerging communities settling in local communities is needed to gain a greater understanding of how to support small and emerging refugee communities. This is important in order to continue to build and strengthen internal refugee community support networks.

# Project Design

## **Ethical Considerations**

When undertaking research that involves refugee communities, ethical considerations should form the framework of the methodological design. This type of research requires additional thought, preparation, time and money. Steel (2003) adds that we need to be flexible in our approach and above all, we need to be able to value all as equals and experts in their own experience (Steel 2003).

New arrival refugees are often under stress from a number of issues arising from settling in a new and unfamiliar country without basic resources and the support of family and friends. Research was conducted in recognition that settlement information, support and advocacy may need to be provided to participants. In fact, nearly all of the individual and group consultations resulted in the need to provide follow- up information, referral and support. Some prospective participants were undergoing particular crisis including homelessness and family breakdown. In these cases, settlement casework was provided instead of participating in the research.

Factors of settlement priorities also impacts on research methodologies; on what you ask and how and in recognition of the cost of participation (Guerin & Guerin 2007). It is important for research questions to be relevant, useful and of interest to the community (Guerin & Guerin 2007). Care was taken in asking for time and other resources from participants and communities and while we were not able to provide financial reimbursement, participation barriers such as transport and language were addressed.

Introducing the topic of research was particularly important to establish informed consent and to address any community concerns. Some participants felt reluctant talking about their

community without other members, particularly leaders, being present. In these instances the aims of the project needed to be fully explained to participants. The voluntary nature of participation was highlighted and participants were informed that not all questions needed to be answered if they did not want to. Other respondents required additional support in understanding certain concepts around social supports and networks.

Information was on all but one occasion, where it was not required, provided with the use of an interpreter. While there were some issues with using interpreting services, understanding about the project and communication between participant and researcher could not otherwise have been reached. Use of interpreters ensured consent was provided on an informed basis and that participation was voluntary. Participants were informed about the objectives of the research project and the how findings would be used. Again, it was stressed that participation was voluntary and not dependent on any other form of support.

Privacy measures, as explained to participants, included collection, storage, and dissemination of information that would not identify individual community members. Participants were also provided with a choice to contribute individually or as part of a group. These measures were particularly important when working with small and emerging communities, where maintaining private and sensitive information private may be more difficult.

An important ethical consideration when working with refugee communities is the final analysis. Considering the lack of voice within marginalised communities it is important to remember the imbalance of power and to use gathered information in a way that will not misrepresent or over- generalise communities. It is also important to recognise the strengths and resilience of communities and how weaknesses may result from institutionalised inequities. Finally our role in working with refugee communities is to build on identified strengths in order to develop capacity and sustainability.

## **Method**

'Contractual' relationships developed through research in most western societies, such as surveys or questionnaires can be useful in obtaining particular information (Guerin & Guerin 2007). However in more complex social situations these methods alone are not as effective. With close communities and groups, research cannot be undertaken without the building of 'rapport'. This means that a greater amount of time is needed and that research methods and approaches need to be flexible and responsive to community need. In addition, the 'data' to be obtained does not 'reside' in one individual but is spread across the community, so the methods must change (Guerin & Guerin 2007). This was indeed an important learning throughout this project and rapport building was a constant activity and integral to being able to undertake the research.

Research methods also tried to be flexible and meet community needs. In response, focus groups and individual interviews, telephone and face-to-face, were utilized as methods in this research project and participants were provided with a choice of the most preferred method. Focus groups allowed for issues to be addressed in greater depth, with opportunities for the discussion to address issues additional to individual surveys. Participants play a more prominent and empowered role than they do in most other research models (Burnham et al 2004). Focus groups may however create a situation where marginalized individuals are not able to voice their views and experiences. Individual interviews therefore allowed for isolated and marginalized community members to be involved, without fear or recrimination from other community members from which they may be excluded (Burnham et al 2004).

A pilot study was conducted in order to refine the research questions and findings from this study were not used as part of the findings or final analysis. The pilot study led to the development of 3 main themes, Migration and Settlement, Community Strengthening and

Community Participation. These 3 main themes enabled a conversation between researcher and participant to be generated. (See Appendix 2 and 3 for focus group and individual research questions).

Focus group and individual interviews were conducted by attending regular group meetings, through clients accessing Whittlesea Community Connections Settlement Services and through an internal client database. Different methods were used in recognition of people's other commitments and settlement priorities such as English language classes, job search obligations and medical appointments and in order to address participation barriers such as transport and child-care. Interviews were conducted in an informal way as was possible in order to develop a more in- depth conversation (Powles 2004). For this reason it was decided not to record interviews using a tape recorder.

### **Sampling Processes**

Snowball sampling approach was used, which relies on a series of referrals that are made within a circle of people who know each other or are loosely connected (CEP 2007). This approach does run the risk of producing a biased sample, excluding those not linked to the organisation or individual. However considering the specific target and small nature of emerging communities the snowball approach was the most effective and also overcame issues of access and trust (Jacobsen & Landau 2003).

### **Limitations**

Forming links with isolated and marginalised community members can be difficult to do and we cannot be entirely sure that emerging communities were adequately targeted. A total of 82 community members participated in the research, while large considering the local refugee population, cannot necessarily be used to make widespread conclusions to other areas, times and communities.

The issues of language and use of an interpreter during interviews did have its limitations. Much of the original narrative is inevitably lost as it is translated from its verbal form in the language of the story-teller to written form in a very different language. Anthropologist Abu-Lughod admits the enormity of the problem when she says of her own work, 'it seemed that a number of essential qualities of everyday conversation and narrative just could not gracefully be carried over into English' (Powles 2004: 16).

We think in terms of the social relationships involved in research between researchers and participants and what methods are necessary to answer the research questions. However the short-term social relationships usually developed with interview methods are usually not enough to get the answers and complexities needed in refugee research (Guerin & Guerin 2007). Certainly, the longer relationships had been developed and maintained, the more in depth information was gathered from participants. While this does not mean that responses from other participants were necessarily 'wrong' they will be different and it is important to recognise this.

Research participants are usually in a position of lesser power and may try to protect themselves or please the interviewer by giving answers that do not yet reveal very much or provide what the researcher 'wants' to hear. This may particularly be the case in smaller communities. Alternatively, history of bad experience with researchers or a lack of tangible outcomes for research participants influenced hesitation to participate in research (Guerin & Guerin 2007).

## **Learnings**

Research with refugee communities requires extensive preparatory work gaining the trust, collaboration and permission from communities to work alongside them (Guerin & Guerin

2007). Once these relationships are established they also need to be sustained post research participation in some way. This is a big commitment that needs to be considered within the research design, timeframe and implementation of findings.

An approach that allows for interventions to develop and work alongside the research methodologies is needed when working with refugee communities (Guerin & Guerin 2007). Actions such as addressing settlement barriers, providing connections to appropriate service providers, advocating and being responsive to community needs are also important for rapport building (Guerin & Guerin 2007). Research with refugee communities cannot follow strict research approaches but needs to implement research findings while also undertaking the research. This ensures that research is a mutual exchange and of mutual benefit.

Communities are highly dynamic and researchers need to be careful about what is described as 'traditional', particularly when there are many other factors in the social, economic and historical contexts. Methodologies therefore need to be geared towards finding changes and flexibility rather than just a static, snapshot picture of a community (Guerin & Guerin 2007). The final analysis also needs to take this into consideration and adapt recommendations to the fluidity of communities.

Research responses indicated that there was a strong connection between past and present experiences. In their discussion, Leydesdorff et al state, 'the impact of trauma makes the processes of remembering and forgetting more complex than in other situations and survivors are therefore particularly likely to express themselves in stories containing elements which are...fragmented.....and loaded with symbolism' (Powles 2004). Comments such as the following highlight the impact of previous experiences.

*'White people have helped us but we have been influenced by our past' (Male, Burundi).*

*'It is very hard to let go of the past' (Male, Burundi).*

Refugee stories contained historical elements that impacted on their experience within the settlement context and on the unity and strength of communities.

Undertaking this research and working closely with community groups also highlighted the level, of untapped and unrecognised skill that exists within local refugee communities. Additional work is needed to further explore this aspect and to develop ways for enhancing and integrating these skills into mainstream social and economic community participation opportunities.

# Findings

## **Part 1: Demographic Data**

A total of 82 participants were consulted as part of this research project. Participating communities included the Burundian, Rwanda, Liberian, Sierra Leone, Sudanese and Iraqi. Language groups included Acholi, Nbuer, Dinka, Acholi, Mhadi, Creol, Mindy, Gio, Kirundi, Kinyarwanda and Arabic. All participants had arrived in Australia under the humanitarian program.

Specific demographic data was not always possible to obtain. This was particularly the case with focus groups conducted in participants' homes, as women with children were not able to remain present throughout the entire consultation but would often walk in out of the conversation. Some participants also arrived late in the consultation due to competing priorities and issues with transport.

Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted largely with community members living in the City of Whittlesea. Participants predominantly resided in the urban south of the City, Thomastown, Lalor and Epping. Municipalities where refugee communities have established links were also included to identify difficulties maintaining networks in the context of dispersed settlement. These municipalities included Darebin, Maribyrnong and Dandenong.

One respondent declined to take part indicating that he had been part of several consultations and had not received a response or gained any community benefit from participating in the research. Several clients wanted to participate in the research but were undergoing some form of crisis at the time. Intensive settlement support was therefore provided to clients rather than pursue research questions. Both these issues raise the need to think clearly about the

aim and ethical framework of research with refugee communities, ensuring there is community feedback and benefit.

## **Part 2: Community Responses**

### **Migration and Settlement: *'We make strong our foundation to help ourselves'***

#### ***(Focus Group, Sudan)***

While settlement difficulties and barriers were identified throughout the research, overall, there was an overwhelming sense of the improvements to life outcomes and opportunities in settling in Australia. A priority for re-settlement and the common response to the benefits of being here were safety, peace and harmony. The opportunities children, young people and those with no previous education had to learn English and further their education closely followed this. Some participants were participating in formal education for the first time. Services that provided information and support, assisting new arrival participants to overcome settlement difficulties were identified as helpful and beneficial to communities. For many participants, access to essential services was something they did not have previously.

*'People are willing to help here, the system is much better and it is safe. People were aggressive in Africa after the war, it is not like that here' (Female, Liberia)*

*'There is no war, no hiding, no shooting here' (Female, Liberia).*

*'Children are learning for the future' (Female, Liberia)*

Indeed participants found it very difficult to compare life in Australia and back home and looked to the future positively.

However settling to a new country, while offering peace, education and supporting services still presented its' difficulties. Through participating in this research alone, nearly all respondents identified that they required assistance to overcome different settlement barriers.

Settlement issues identified and addressed included community development advice, employment, training and education, housing and accommodation, childcare, parenting and youth issues, financial crisis and budgeting, migration and family reunion and access to settlement services. Community development advice and information about employment, training and education were the two main issues where information, referrals and support were provided to participants. This reflected the research aims to identify community support needs and build on the inherent skill base of refugee communities. The provision of settlement information, referral and advocacy highlights the fact that research with vulnerable communities in particular requires follow-up support.

While participants had accessed settlement and other essential services, exchange of information and support was also occurring on an informal basis within internal community support structures. The benefits of belonging to community groups were evident for participants and community support played an important role in the settlement of new arrival refugees. Community groups and networks provided advice about living in Australia, how to manage settlement challenges and remain respectful and mindful of each other. Participants spoke about the importance of community networks in providing opportunities to discuss issues that living in a new culture presented. Analysis of issues using different experiences and perspectives facilitated the exchange of ideas and solutions, providing comfort and increased confidence to overcome problems. The social aspect of community should not be undermined either. It played an important role in addressing the isolation and disconnection experienced by new arrivals, particularly where there were language barriers.

*'If there are no meetings, new arrivals won't know about others in the community' (Male, Burundi)*

*'We came together as one, if there is a new arrival, we receive them, show them how to live in Australia and help them...we are all one big family' (Male, Burundi)*

*'People have problems so meeting are to teach/ counsel, share ideas, not to fight, we have to come together, you have someone to talk to.' (Female, Sudan)*

*'We meet to solve our problems, difficulties between the family, looking after kids and how to bring them up in Australia' (Male, Sudan)*

*'Children should not forget our culture, love brings us together and we want to sustain our unity so that the children will have elders and children will know everything that is Acholi' (Focus Group, Sudan)*

*'We don't say 'I' we say 'we'- we help each other, we help new arrivals with orientation' (Focus Group, Sudan)*

*'Through the community we get connections, we find out about support through our community' (Female, Sudan)*

However some participants felt isolated from established community support structures or felt that particular community groups or individuals were not showing good leadership. One respondent indicated that the community had offered very little that was positive, as the community was not working together but going in different directions. The need to address unity was more evident in smaller communities that had split over tribal differences and identities. This had caused isolation for members of marginal tribal groups and was disclosed by 4 participants. A participant from a very small community for example, had tried to join a larger community but had experienced discriminatory treatment because of her ethnic background.

*'The problem is that we have been in war for a long time. People were born outside of Burundi, for example, Congo, and depending on where you were born has made other groups misunderstand' (Male, Burundi)*

*'It's like having a sore and it heals but when leaders invite people together, it's like going back to those problems' (Male, Burundi)*

It was evident from such responses that the impact of traumatic histories continued to influence the present and the way communities came together. This was a recurrent theme and integral to the success of community strengthening approaches.

Issues between community members also occurred where there were significant differences in levels of English proficiency. Those with greater English language skills tended to adopt the role of community advocate, liaising with external communities and organisations. Language barriers sometimes caused mistrust between the community 'voice' and other community members. For example, participants indicated that there was a feeling that government grants had been misused by community leaders. Others linked this perception to past experiences, where leaders often abused their power. There was a belief by some participants therefore that living in a more peaceful and trusting environment would help the community overcome these issues and come together.

While issues were identified in some communities, these support structures nevertheless remained open for members to re-join.

*'People can come back and say sorry and be able to meet again' (Male, Burundi).*

*'Isolation exists the only way to bring them back, you cannot force them, but when there's a problem, they realise they need community' (Male, Sudan)*

These responses indicate that participants recognised the fluidity of community structures, that people will come and go and that communities needed to be open to this natural occurrence. Further, communities remained a constant in both difficult and prosperous times.

*'We help each other if there's an occasion, a festival, if there's good or bad news, for example, when there's a funeral, we sit together and solve problems' (Male, Sudan)*

It should be noted that internal community conflict was not an issue all of the time and not an issue for all groups. In fact other participants indicated that the community structure was supportive and working well.

*'We all support each other and do not differentiate between different tribes- 'we are all one' & that ' we are working all together in harmony to support each other' (Female, Sudan)*

The frequency of community meetings and level of activities organised through communities varied vastly. Regularity of meeting times ranged from once to every three months, while some communities met only for special occasions. Ability to coordinate community meetings on a regular basis was largely impacted by the lack of appropriate meeting space and cost of venues that were available.

Some communities were highly organised and tried to ensure that women and young people were able to have their voice heard within largely male dominated leadership structures. In these communities for example, female-headed associations were provided with the opportunity to raise and address their specific concerns to the general committee. This was particularly important for single parents who had arrived under the women at risk visa, as they lacked representation within the leadership structure.

Participants highlighted the need to become self-reliant, particularly financially. Several community groups had developed their own community saving accounts in order to achieve both short-term and long-term goals. New arrivals could be assisted for immediate financial needs such as the cost of airfares for special humanitarian entrants reuniting with family members. However the ability to access such support varied. Successful grant applications enabled communities to celebrate and recognise important community events. However more long-term programs such as teaching young people first language were not resourced effectively for sustainable outcomes. One particular community was aiming to establish a community-based organisation, led by and for refugee communities into the future.

*'We join hands together to give something to support the community every month, we do not ask for money from the government' (Male, Sudan)*

Some participants however indicated that the financial contribution to the community was difficult and prevented them from being fully part of the established network.

All participants spoke of a community leadership structure. While there were some issues with leaders as mentioned earlier, there was also a focus on democratic processes and community consultation in the development of community leadership. Most community leaders had been elected and elections were held on a regular basis. This enabled the leadership to change and ensured greater opportunity for sharing decision-making among the community.

Capacity to connect with community networks impacted more adversely on women who had to manage a number of competing responsibilities including study, childcare and other household responsibilities. Single parents with a disability or with a child with a disability were particularly disadvantaged. One participant added that several unaccompanied minors remained isolated from the community and needed additional support. Another participant indicated that unless another community member assisted her and the children with transport, she could not attend any meetings. A single parent with a child with a disability said,

*'Getting transport with a child with a disability is difficult and I can't leave the children alone. I used to go to meetings but now it is difficult.'* (Female, Liberia)

The role of support workers was identified as important within this context, addressing issues of access and providing links to local and essential supports. Short-term programs that did not provide on-going support options did however impact on participants. Greater sustainability and longevity of programs is needed, especially for new arrivals with complex and multiple support needs.

The difficulties women and families experience in settlement is strongly linked to family separation and loss of support networks. Family and friends were important in providing information and support and in particular, helping with child-care. Support with child-care enabled women to take advantage of education and employment opportunities, increasing family capacity. This had become much more difficult within the new settlement context

because of the severe disruption to family support networks. Family reunion also contributed to a sense of safety and wellbeing.

*'When we think about family left behind, our hearts melt, we can't sleep for thinking about them, it has a really big impact on the community' (Female, Burundi)*

*'Without family you feel very isolated. Family reunion was important to feel at home, safe' (Female Liberia)*

Family separation increases the importance of community support networks that fill these gaps. For this reason it is particularly important to address access barriers for women.

*'At first being in Australia was bad because we had lost many relatives. After some time, the community develops, even if they are not relatives, they are considered as family' (Male, Sudan)*

Older generations were identified as an important source of guidance and support within communities and families. Many respondents discussed how the loss of the generation was impacting on their community.

*'Everything is different now. The family is different we need to teach discipline in different ways. Culture is affecting people a lot, especially children. Traditionally children have to listen to elders, here it is different' (Female, Sudan)*

*'Youth are adopting the Australian system very fast without thinking. They are behaving differently and want to be like other Australian children. We need to help the children' (Male, Sudan)*

*'If there were differences/ problems between husband and wife, we call the elders to intervene and solve the problem. It is one of our aims for our society. What has happened here is that we don't have elders or enough people to solve problems. We are trying to do this job especially with the children' (Male, Sudan)*

Older generations were strongly linked to the maintenance of culture and ethnic identity and to the guidance of young people in particular.

The fact that small and emerging refugee communities have been settled across Victoria had mixed responses in terms of the ability of communities to still come together and support one another. For some dispersed settlement was actually considered a good thing in order to maintain peace within communities and was linked to survival mechanisms pre- migration to Australia.

*'When we escaped from war, we went apart, so they couldn't catch us easily, this is the reason we are alive, it is because we separated' (Male, Burundi)*

The fact that people were living in different areas was in itself motivation to come together as a community.

There was an emphasis on informing each other prior to community meetings or events. Further, the avid use of technology including the Internet and mobile phones made linkages with scattered community members much easier.

*'Here there are possibilities to reach people no matter where they are, by telephone or you can visit them by public transport.'* (Female, Sudan)

*'We don't need to be in one place to stay connected' (Female, Liberia)*

The strength of informal support networks to maintain good communication between dispersed and isolated community members is evident. This also indicates capacity to use new strategies and technologies to improve communication systems within new context.

However others indicated that dispersed settlement was a difficulty for the community to come together, particularly for those living in regional areas, reducing the level of community connection.

*'In Sudan we were all in the same area but here we are all in different areas. For me, I am the only one from our tribe here. To call close relatives for help they are too far away' (Male, Sudan)*

*'Everybody is busy and with everybody spread out it is hard to get together' (Female, Liberia)*

*'It is very hard because suburbs we are living in are very far. We cannot have one community meeting because some are in Dandenong, Werribee and Footscray, we cannot connect at the same time' (Female, Sudan)*

*'There is not much ability to support each other here at all. We are living on a Centrelink income, we are a small community and we are not living close by' (Female, Sierra Leone).*

*'The problem is that we are spread all over not just in Dandenong' (Female, Sudan)*

The fact that most of these comments were made by female participants further indicates the fact that dispersed settlement is having more adverse impacts on women and women with children.

Other barriers for communities to come together included transport, child-care having a venue to meet, knowledge of the area, and competing settlement priorities. New arrival entrants need to manage priorities including English classes, employment and supporting family within changing roles and in a new cultural and systemic context.

*'Everyone here are brothers, same language, understand each other, but everyone is too busy to help' (Female, Sudan)*

Dispersed settlement makes the ability to access support from community networks more complex, particularly as they are also managing similar experiences and issues. Having good local supports with links to wider networks would increase capacity to support communities within this context.

The loss of family support networks and the complexity of learning to negotiate new systems without basic resources such as language highlight the significance and added importance of maintaining community support networks. It is clear that refugee communities have re-established support structures however face a number of barriers in developing and strengthening these networks. The barriers for women to access these supports are heightened. Yet despite these barriers there is a strong commitment within refugee

communities to develop the skills and capacity to enhance their independence. Recommendations to improve community structures, as identified by and for refugee communities, are detailed below.

**Community Strengthening- *‘Whenever we are united we are strong’ (Female, Sudan)***

Continued commitment to reunite remaining family members was identified as key to enhancing the strength and unity of families and communities. This was particularly important for very small communities, the value of which cannot be under-estimated.

*‘We have no community, we feel like the Department settles us everywhere so that we cannot gather strength’ (Male, Rwanda)*

*‘If my children are able to come here it will increase our strength’ (Female, Liberia)*

A single parent, who had arrived under the women at risk visa, had applied for two of her brothers remaining in a refugee camp to reunite with her in Australia. She was unaware of where the children’s father was located or if he was still alive. The application was not successful. It is cases like these that should be considered priorities within the Special Humanitarian Program. Continued access to free migration advice, which participants had indicated had been very helpful is essential. In addition, the cost of family reunion needs to be addressed, as the cost of travel tickets alone can accumulate to several thousand dollars. This places new arrival humanitarian entrants at a huge disadvantage even before they arrive.

Maintaining ethnic identity was identified as a community strengthening strategy, however communities were currently finding this difficult. Within the new settlement context there is an emphasis on learning English, new systems, laws and processes in order to successfully integrate. It is difficult to therefore maintain cultural identity as it once was. Some communities had tried to establish informal learning programs where traditional languages were passed down. However there was a need for greater resources to ensure sustainability of such initiatives, in particular the need for an appropriate space was identified as a priority.

Communities therefore feared that native languages, which form the foundation of identity, would be lost.

*'How can we teach our language if English is a priority, which means we'll lose everything' (Male, Sudan)*

*'Children should not forget our culture' (Female, Sudan)*

Ethnic identity was also strongly linked to music, dance and cultural performance. For one particular community, for example, drumming was strongly linked to the facilitation of community ceremonies and was integral to the political and social identity of the community. Drums also provided a role for men within cultural ceremonies, which they feel they have now lost, as the drums are difficult to make and obtain in Australia. Some participants feared that many of their traditions could not therefore be fully sustained.

Leadership development, community education, mutual learning opportunities and enhancing community unity were seen as priorities in strengthening and assisting communities to come together. Enhancing leadership and community support structures that were accessible within local communities was also identified.

*'If leader divides people they cannot lead' (Male, Burundi)*

*'Each area should have their own leader because if they are far away, they cannot help everyone' (Male, Sudan)*

*'We need to promote the message of coming together and being in a group' (Male, Burundi)*

*'An important issue is to educate the community about uniting, not individualise' (Male, Sudan)*

*'We need education to enlighten people's mind we need to unite communities, not just one community but many coming together. If we are going in the same direction, we can achieve much more' (Male, Sudan).*

*'It's hard to live in the community, there are always problems, we cannot change that, it's part of nature. We need to meet to teach each other, learn about the laws etc'*  
(Female, Sudan)

*'We cannot understand the division when we came here to unite with no discrimination'*  
(Male, Burundi)

*'We want peaceful minds and believe that god created everyone as equals'* (Male, Burundi)

While it was acknowledged that people would not come together by force, participants highlighted that the idea of working together across cultures and ethnicities needed greater promotion. Communities would recognise the importance of this message if made more public. The theme of peace and unity reoccurred and was again linked to past and present experiences.

Young people were strongly identified by participants, as the future leaders of refugee communities. This was despite commonly held perceptions by parents and elders within the community that young people were adopting elements of Australian culture too readily, forgetting the past. Some participants therefore spoke about young people quite negatively.

*'Young people hang around, they don't study, they don't obey Australian law, you can see young people acting badly'* (Female, Sudan)

Young participants' perspective however was very different and highlighted the tension between generations regarding acculturation and the rate to which this was occurring. Young participants were in fact highly motivated to integrate into mainstream education, employment and social opportunities. Some had also tried to establish and coordinate programs for other young people in the community independent of formal support, particularly in relation to sports and recreation. The lack of resources, venue and links to mainstream opportunities were however barriers in sustaining community led initiatives.

Enhancing young people's capacity to lead the community into the future requires greater attention to supporting English language acquisition, homework support and transition to further education and training. Providing information about rights and responsibilities within the new legal, social and cultural context was also recommended by participants. The need for information was linked to the feeling that communities did not fully understand what freedom meant in the new settlement context and that freedom needed to be understood in legal, social and political contexts.

*'We need training programs for young people that are directed in the right way according to the community. Talk to children, welcome, them, hear advise from them and other people from the community. The community needs to be part of planning of programs because they are aware of cultural aspects' (Male, Sudan)*

*'Train the children traditional African values of respecting elders and parents' (Female, Liberia)*

These responses indicate that while learning the new systems and integrating into mainstream education opportunities was important, so too was maintaining cultural identity and respecting the past. The importance of consulting directly with young people and the community in order to develop appropriate responses in partnership was also highlighted.

Addressing the needs of women and women with children was an important community strengthening strategy, identified by both male and female participants.

*'Women need many things, they are new and not familiar with the situation here' (Male, Sudan)*

*'It is difficult for women to come together we are busy with study and children. But when we call people together women join hands. We need new projects making things and to see how we can help new comers' (Female, Sudan)*

Refugee women remained largely isolated from education, social and economic opportunities and often had to wait long periods in order to access such opportunities. A participant for

example, had only been able to access English classes after being in Australia for one year, due to the lack of child-care. This forced female participants in particular to remain dependent on family and friends for language and other support. Addressing barriers such as child-care and transport is essential for refugee women to have greater and equal access to training, education and community participation opportunities.

Community development advice, including applying for government grants, assisting with coordination of group activities, locating venues and linking communities to relevant service providers was considered integral to community strengthening. Advice would allow communities to understand how systems and processes operate in the new context, ensuring communities benefit from equal access to information, resources and government funding. In order to provide this support, organisations needed to work with communities by building relationships and opportunities to share and exchange skills and knowledge. This was particularly important where emerging communities were beginning to gain confidence and networks.

*'It's like the relationship between parent and a child- if you keep asking you might not get it' (Male, Burundi)*

The likening of refugee communities to children that do not have the power to identify needs and develop responses indicates that service providers have the responsibility to develop this confidence in recognition of the power imbalance.

Several respondents from different refugee communities suggested the establishment of a general African community or committee that could help identify gaps and needs within each community and develop strategies to assist based on combined resources, knowledge and skills. The committee could manage resources to assist in times of crisis and assist people who are suffering, both here and overseas. This could facilitate community led initiatives that more appropriately meet the needs of new arrivals.

Communities requested that their voice to be heard in decision- making processes. Communities need to be able to approach governments in order to discuss and address issues as they arise and ensure responses are appropriate. The media portrayal of the Sudanese community following an incident involving the death of a Sudanese young person and the comments made by the then Immigration Minister in 2007 was cited as an example where lack of communication between the government and community had led to inappropriate responses. These responses were based on misinformation and misconceptions that could have been rectified had there been mechanisms for open communication.

Finally, in order to ensure these strategies can be implemented effectively issues of transport and venue space were identified as vital. Transport to assist women with children was particularly mentioned. A significant proportion of respondents indicated that there was a need for a flexible and welcoming meeting space where a range of activities and programs could be coordinated. As participants said:

*'We are lacking space to practice our culture- that is our identity and gives us a sense of belonging...would also give other people a chance to appreciate our traditions and culture' (Male Burundi)*

*'We have no place to meet we are always meeting at houses and cannot take large numbers. We need to find a place not a house' (Male, Sudan)*

*'The problem is we have no place to meet, we meet in church or English class and that is all' (Female, Sudan)*

*'We are dispersed and have no venue so we meet in people's homes, we don't know where to go for support' (Male, Liberia)*

*'We have no specific place to teach our children, we are willing to do it but we have no place, we tried meeting in the park but it did not work...we need a centre for cultural activities' (Focus Group, Sudan)*

The lack of meeting and community activity space has clear implications for community strengthening. Without a space to come together, discuss community issues and plan for community needs, strategies to develop and build community capacity cannot be achieved in a meaningful and sustainable way. Participants indicated a need to build on knowledge and skills within refugee communities in order to develop independent support structures. A space where new arrivals feel welcome and part of the community is important and will encourage different communities to work together.

It was recognised by participants that community strengthening cannot be achieved alone and in isolation but the assistance of other communities and organisations was needed and mutually beneficial. In addition, one respondent recommended seeking advice from the indigenous community, as the similarities between indigenous and refugee communities was noted. While identifying the importance of government grants, participants recognised the dual need for support and guidance.

*'We welcome agencies or persons to come and talk with us to see how our society is doing' (Male, Sudan)*

*'We can't do it by ourselves' (Male, Burundi)*

The inter-dependence and mutual learning from diverse communities, service providers and government emerged as a common theme. This was particularly highlighted in the need to enhance community participation opportunities for refugee communities that remained isolated socially and economically.

**Community Participation- *'We need a long- term plan to integrate peacefully into the Australian community' (Focus Group, Sudan)***

All participants indicated that it was important to connect with other diverse communities including the mainstream Australian community. In fact there was a feeling of isolation and lack of connection within the local community.

*'Neighbours are part of the family in Sudan but here we don't know our neighbour'  
(Male, Sudan)*

*'At home if you had a problem, you explained to a friend and she would help. There is no help from the community here. You have to travel to speak to someone and if you don't have money you can't travel. You need people close by to counsel you.'* (Female, Sierra Leone)

Language was identified as the major barrier in developing these connections.

*'It would be nice [to become involved with the wider community] but language is a problem. In our group we can communicate with each other but in another group, we cannot understand, we cannot pass on knowledge and vice versa'* (Male, Burundi)

Additional language support and conversational based programs are integral to building confidence and capacity to engage with the wider community.

Racist attitudes and behaviours prevented participants and refugee communities to engage and get involved with the wider community. This added to the sense of isolation experienced by new arrival communities.

*'People look at me and avoid me, I feel isolated from the wider community'* (Female Sierra Leone)

*'The media portrayal of Sudanese community is negative and not accurate. Sudanese people need a lot of help I don't know what we are going to do. People don't like us this is an important issue'* (Female, Sudan)

*'There are racist attitudes towards the Muslim community, we want others to know that we are just like them, we want to gain their trust and live the same way, in peace, that is one of the reasons that we came to Australia'* (Female, Iraq)

The disclosure by two participants that their employment had been terminated without reason was also linked to racist attitudes. Those affected were reluctant to take any further action due to the impact this may have on other employees from a refugee background. It is difficult to develop community connections based on trust and common understanding within this

context. The wider community therefore has a responsibility to address this issue and ensure refugee communities have equal access to participate in meaningful and sustainable ways.

Despite experiences of racism and discrimination refugee communities remained positive about the possibilities and opportunities of working with and learning from other communities, including the mainstream community. The benefits of this approach strongly correlated with the aims and objectives of multiculturalism.

*'We can contribute to multiculturalism and make it rich, it will strengthen our relationship with the Australian community' (Male Burundi)*

*'Cultural events could be used to overcome language barriers' (Female, Sudan)*

*'We could learn from other communities, how to do things and go about it- get advice from other communities' (Female, Sudan)*

*'Communities to help each other, to come together and meet' (Male, Burundi)*

*'Would like meetings where different communities come together to talk together' (Male, Sudan)*

*'Community meetings to discuss as a group about how to achieve our goals, good to be linked, can learn from other communities, languages and how to overcome barriers' (Female, Sudan)*

*'Meet and organise cultural groups to come together, visit new arrivals, teach way of living together' (Male, Burundi)*

There was a focus on learning from diverse communities and sharing support and information in order to overcome settlement barriers and achieve common and long-term community goals. Participants recognised the benefits of living in a multicultural community and indicated a need to capitalise on the strengths that this presented.

Participants identified the fact that community members were already volunteering within their own community. Informal volunteer roles included interpreting, assisting new arrivals to access services and coordinating community meetings. Those experiencing additional

participation barriers, particularly women with children, expressed a desire to at some stage help and give back to the community.

*'I am a single parent and would like to work and support my children and community but can I do it?' (Female, Liberia)*

*'I need to do something for my community, I am willing to use my spare time to help' (Female, Rwanda)*

*'We're here to work for one another to build the community. Different tribes bring ideas together. We need to become independent and volunteer to help the community' (Female, Liberia)*

*'I am not expecting a profit [from helping the community] but have to be ready to help whoever is willing to learn' (Female, Rwanda)*

Participants indicated a need to also contribute to the economy through gained employment but were finding this difficult due to English language and other barriers.

*'I need to learn more being illiterate' (Female, Sudan)*

*'I would like to be able to read for myself' (Female, Liberia)*

*'We need to learn hands- on skills that do not require written English' (Male, Burundi)*

While learning English was a key objective, participants indicated that other training and education pathways were also important. Recognising and building on previous skills and knowledge, while not always formally attained was identified as key in developing linkages to mainstream economic opportunities.

A range of skills including farming and agriculture, running small businesses, community education, sewing, bicycle mechanics, carpentry and pottery were identified through consultations. These skills were largely learnt without formal education and were gained through necessity as part of the refugee experience. Several participants were highly skilled with tertiary education qualifications and had also experienced difficulties gaining employment within the private market. Respondents identified that previously acquired skills should be

further developed. Learning to use alternative methods such as electrical tools and IT software for example would be a useful and logical extension of existing knowledge. Skills within refugee communities should be shared with other communities, highlighting opportunities for mutual learning. While support is needed for skill development the fact that emerging refugee communities have something to offer the community and economy also needs to be recognised. This will lead to more meaningful and sustainable outcomes for both refugee and mainstream communities.

### **Analysis of Findings**

This study highlights the importance of community support networks and the extent to which they provide much of the informal settlement support and social connections necessary to achieve successful settlement outcomes. Community support structures provide a holistic approach to settlement, addressing the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of communities. Greater recognition of this work is needed particularly considering the large voluntary contribution made to the community. This also indicates the inherent strength within emerging refugee communities that has enabled communities to re-establish themselves within a new and complex context. Capacity to adapt to new situations and use available resources and technology to maintain community connections further indicates the skills and proactive approach of emerging refugee communities.

Community entities are unique and diverse. The ways, in which community structures have been established, come together and support one another varied widely. Communities were fluid and able to adapt to different settlement challenges, as suggested by their open and flexible approach to community membership. The impact of past experiences had clear implications for community strengthening, as the link between the past and present was a common thread in participant responses. The need to maintain peace and unity within communities was continually highlighted and the stability of the settlement environment provided new opportunities for communities to build trust and address any issues of internal

conflict. While it was difficult to generalise about community dynamics, given their changing nature, it could be said that community networks remained a constant source of support despite these issues and difficulties. Working with communities requires the recognition of this inherent strength as well as the diversity that exists within community support networks. There was a correlation between the size of communities and the capacity to further develop and maintain support structures, particularly within difficult and challenging circumstances. Larger refugee communities were more able to develop support networks that ensured diverse community voices were represented and addressed, which created a greater sense of unity. Access to information and relevant support organisations varied but were more readily accessed by larger, more networked communities. De-stabilising factors such as loss of family and friends and dispersed settlement also had a much greater impact on smaller community support structures. Rather than dismantle community supports however, smaller communities worked much harder in order to maintain community connections. Maintaining community support structures within this context increased in importance, because of the size of the community.

Capacity of community support networks was impacted by level of prior education and level of English proficiency. While some participants came from highly educated and skilled backgrounds there were also significant levels of disrupted and low education attainment. Participants made the distinction between two different groups of humanitarian entrants, regardless of their background, those that were educated and those who were not. Different flight, displacement and settlement patterns had significantly impacted on languages acquired by humanitarian entrants. Language acquisition in turn influenced accessible opportunities as well as positions held within community support structures. Pre- migration experiences were important to current community structures. Connections with a diverse cross- section of communities need to be made, as language barriers may hide important knowledge and skills that are integral to community strengthening.

Emerging refugee communities had made extensive efforts to re-establish community support structures within the settlement context despite the lack of essential resources such as language and knowledge of new systems. Loss of support networks however had the greatest impact on families and community networks, particularly for women and young people. Networks of extended family and friends provided support integral to community strengthening including information, guidance and appropriate external linkages. Support for women with children to access education and employment was largely provided through community support networks. The loss of these networks therefore impacted more adversely on women's access to opportunities presented within settlement.

The impact of the loss of family support networks was also strongly linked to the settlement outcomes of young people. Changed family structures had led to a shift in power relationships within new arrival refugee families. The speed of young people's acculturation caused some participants concern, whether based on perceived or actual experiences. Young people's perspective however was significantly different. This indicates that settlement impacted on young people and parents differently and that there was a need for greater understanding of the change in family dynamics. This analysis however needs to occur in partnership with refugee communities and requires responses that directly resource communities.

Dispersed settlement had different levels of impact on communities' ability to maintain connections and support networks. The fact that all participants belonged to communities with membership across municipal borders indicates the importance of community networks and the strength required to maintain connections despite such barriers.

For migrants and refugees, social networks are understood not only geographically but also as a link between members of a community of origin or individuals who are living in another place (Curran & Fuentes 2003). Community strengthening initiatives therefore need to take this into consideration, as refugee community structures do not often identify with a single

Local Government Area. This is particularly important for smaller communities that have a greater need to maintain such links.

A range of community strengthening strategies was identified and participants knew the barriers that needed to be overcome in order to enhance community capacity and sustainability. Initial steps included family reunion and maintaining ethnic identity. Family reunion would strengthen communities in several ways including improving health and wellbeing, providing supports for women to participate in community capacity building activities and providing guidance and support to families, young people and communities. Strong communities and identities provided the foundation for connecting with other diverse and mainstream communities.

Indeed building links with other communities was identified as a priority for research participants. Connecting with diverse migrant and refugee communities was seen as a valuable way of exchanging experiences and learnings in order to better navigate settlement challenges. Engaging with the wider and mainstream community was seen as equally important for integrating and further developing skills and knowledge through joint initiatives and programs. This level of engagement would provide additional opportunities for mutual learning, in recognition of the capacity that also exists within emerging refugee communities. The focus on the need for continued learning identified by participants highlights the dynamism and proactive approach to settlement within emerging communities.

Participants indicated that gaining access to decision making processes and having their voices heard was important if government responses were ever going to be appropriate and responsive to community needs. In order to achieve this, respondents recognised the need to more fully understand their rights and responsibilities within the new legal, social and political context. This would enable communities to engage systems and processes in order to gain community support and resources. Participants willingly accepted the responsibility and right

to developing the independence and self-reliance of their own community. Indeed developing internal strength and sustainability rather than remaining dependent on governments and organisations was a much more desired and stated community outcome. This was particularly the case as situations of dependence had been forced on refugee communities as a result of pre-migration experiences for very long periods of time. Refugee communities therefore viewed settlement as an opportunity to radically change this welfare model.

Barriers such as lack of appropriate and available venue space, transport and child-care also had significant impacts on community capacity building initiatives. While communities had tried to run some activities independently, difficulties in accessing space threatened the viability and sustainability of such initiatives. Programs established by service providers without the recognition of the need to address transport and child-care did not enable a diverse range of community members to participate, particularly women and women with children. Without addressing basic access and participation barriers, implementation of community strengthening strategies will be restricted. The risk is that refugee communities will be seen to be at fault rather than the systematic barriers that we fail to remove. Refugee experiences and responses need to be understood within the structural inequities and systematic racism that exist and continue to impact on settlement outcomes. This power imbalance must be recognised when working with migrant and refugee communities. Difficulties and weaknesses identified within refugee communities must also be understood within this context.

Given this understanding, working with refugee communities requires responsiveness, innovation and flexibility in order to address these barriers. Communities need to be approached within a time, space and cultural context that are appropriate and sensitive of competing settlement challenges, family dynamics, culture and language. Any form of consultation with refugee communities must be evaluated for its relevance and importance.

The impact and cost of participating and use of final analysis need to be carefully considered. Knowledge and resources gained from communities, including time, experiences and community connections must be recognised and reimbursed. Addressing participation barriers and recognising the resources taken from refugee communities will lead to more equitable exchanges with refugee communities. This will also lead to the development of responses that better reflect community needs and aspirations within the context of systemic discrimination.

Working in partnership with refugee communities requires an approach that will identify, recognise and further develop the skills and knowledge within communities. Linkages to mainstream participation opportunities should be made wherever possible in recognition of community needs and skills. Responses to community need should reflect the ways communities operate, particularly as communities provide holistic approaches to addressing community needs. Using strength- based approaches will lead to greater learning experiences and provide opportunities to develop relationships and rapport with communities. This will lead to more equitable, mutual learning exchanges rather than outdated welfare approaches to community development. Emerging and local refugee communities are ready for much more than that.

Finally what we can learn from refugee communities in the way that they have re-developed their own support networks despite extreme levels of adversity is immense. The priority refugee communities place on support structures and community needs in order to build community strength is a model that can be used for developing other isolated and marginalised communities. The governance structures that have been developed have allowed for leadership to emerge from within the community, enhancing independence and sustainability. Some communities have also raised independent sources of income rather than rely on government contributions. The fact that most community leaders and other key members actively volunteer within their community further indicates the proactive approach communities take in order to

support themselves and how we can also learn from this approach. Recognising that we can learn from refugee communities is important, ensuring that integration is based on mutual understanding, equity and community partnerships.

## **Conclusion**

The research findings clearly demonstrate the level of resilience and commitment to enhance community support networks and participation opportunities within emerging refugee communities. Much of this work is currently occurring informally, voluntarily and without much organisational support. Maintaining community structures has occurred despite factors such as the loss of support networks, dispersed settlement and lack of basic resources including language, venues to meet and equity in access and participation opportunities.

Through this research, refugee communities have developed a range of responses that will help strengthen and build internal community support structures based on participant experiences. Enhancing the strength of internal support structures is the first step in developing linkages across diverse communities, making the concept of multiculturalism more meaningful. In order to achieve this however systemic barriers and issues of discrimination need to be addressed. Work undertaken in partnership with refugee communities must also recognise the changing and dynamic nature of communities. Strategies need to be flexible, responsive and in constant and direct consultation with communities in order to capture and reflect changing needs and long- term objectives. Achieving tangible outcomes for communities is essential to ensure relationships continue to be based on trust, rapport and mutual benefits.

It needs to be recognised that refugee communities have an important role to play in developing and implementing strategies around community strengthening, particularly as research findings highlight that service providers and the broader community can learn a great deal from emerging refugee communities. Developing strength based and community led approaches

that recognise and value the expertise of communities is important. Facilitating mutual learning exchanges where emerging refugee communities share their skills and knowledge about responding to their own settlement needs is integral to developing appropriate and community-led responses. Capacity to develop and provide support through independent networks is evident, particularly as communities have the experience and understanding of their own issues, current priorities and appropriate response strategies. Refugee communities have provided internal support often in very difficult circumstances, such as in pre-migration experiences of flight and displacement, for extensive periods of time. Opportunities to participate in and drive their own settlement should be provided to refugee communities, based on proven capacity and the right to self-determination and independence. Recognising that refugee communities themselves have the answers and capacity to do this work will challenge current approaches and redirect resources and opportunities to communities most in need.

## Recommendations

It is important to recognise the work that is occurring in refugee communities and support these processes by using a strength- based community participation approach that builds on skills and expertise of the community. Strategies within this approach include:

- Enhancing family reunion of refugee families and ensuring on-going access to free migration advice for humanitarian entrants. Applications for family reunion under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) involving women that have arrived under the Women at Risk visa, single parents and young people should be prioritised. Additional assistance to those arriving under the SHP is needed considering the cost of reunion, placing new arrivals at an immediate financial disadvantage.
- Supporting programs that maintain ethnic identity that in turn strengthen community connections and capacity to engage with the wider community, particularly those that help maintain first language and significant cultural aspects.
- Exploring opportunities for implementing community strengthening initiatives that work within and across different municipalities. This is particularly important for small and emerging refugee communities that continue to maintain support networks despite the difficulties that dispersed settlement presents. An issue such as access to transport and venues in areas where settlement has occurred requires relevant local government areas to come together and respond collaboratively.
- Planning for and developing flexible and accessible venues for communities to meet and run different activities. Establishing an accessible and appropriate venue should be developed in direct consultation with communities to ensure this space remains community owned and coordinated. A space that facilitates connections across different communities would encourage cross- cultural understanding and strengthen support for emerging and established migrant and refugee communities.

- Providing greater opportunity for diverse refugee, migrant and mainstream communities to come together, discuss issues, exchange ideas and plan responses to address community needs. Established and new arrival communities both have experiences, skills and knowledge to share, adapt and develop. Providing a space to facilitate this learning will strengthen community connections and the availability of independent support networks.
- Providing community development support and advice to emerging refugee communities, that facilitates linkages to resources and mainstream opportunities. This will build capacity within refugee communities to identify and support their own settlement needs.
- Working with local refugee communities, families and young people to develop initiatives that address, the needs of refugee youth. Young people were identified as the future leaders of refugee communities and are integral to community strengthening, with the support and guidance of communities.
- Supporting women, single parents and people with a disability to access community participation opportunities by addressing access barriers such as transport and child-care. In recognition of the significant loss of support networks women and families have lost through the migration process, this type of support is required in order to achieve equity in access and participation.
- Identifying the level and range of skills that exist within local refugee communities and further developing and integrating these skills into mainstream opportunities, particularly economic. Emerging refugee communities have a vast range of knowledge and skills learnt formally and informally, not easily recognised due to significant barriers such as language, resources and lack of relevant networks. Further exploration that specifically seeks to identify and build on these skills is integral to community strengthening with mainstream participation and integration at its foundation.
- Providing greater opportunity for emerging refugee communities to have their diverse voices heard by facilitating access to and participation in decision- making processes. Establishing a northern or local African body that is representative of diverse refugee communities was identified but should occur following consultation with existing regional African bodies.

Greater capacity to participate in such processes will enable communities to identify and advocate for their own needs as well as address ill informed representations of refugee communities as they arise. This will lead to greater dialogue and understanding between refugee and mainstream communities.

- Addressing systemic barriers to mainstream inclusion and participation, particularly racism and discrimination. Without addressing these issues at a systemic level, community strengthening strategies and efforts made by refugee communities will have very little impact. Refugee communities have the right to equal access to mainstream participation on all levels, social, economic, civic and political.
- Exploring how mainstream organisations and communities can learn from and adapt the processes and supports refugee communities have put in place. Fluid community support networks that give voice to women and young people, develop appropriate governance structures, encourage volunteering and develop financial supports independent of government contributions indicates that refugee communities have diverse and high level skill sets that we can learn from. Recognising this and providing opportunities for refugee communities to share their skills and experiences with others is important, ensuring that integration is based on mutual understanding, equity and community partnerships.

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# Appendices

## **Appendix 1: Definitions**

A refugee, as defined by the United Nations Convention (1951) and sanctioned by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) is:

*Owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country; or who not having a nationality and being outside the country of his/her former habitual residence, is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.*

## **Small and Emerging Communities**

These are broadly defined as communities from EP3 and EP4 countries with an Australia-wide population of between 1,000 and 15,000, of whom 30% or more have arrived in the last five years (DIMA 2003: 100).

## **Social Support**

Social support is a network of family, friends or colleagues that you can turn to whether in times of crisis, or simply for support and companionship (Willems 2003). Support may include a variety of resources such as emotional and social, material assistance, financial aid, information, advice and understanding.

## **Support Networks**

Support networks are a starting point for rebuilding links or sources of support. Support networks can be defined as a category of people who in terms of the values of the community

might provide a range of support and services including links to information, resources and meaningful opportunities for social exchanges (House et al 1988). In order for support networks to be successful, social linkages and some social exchange or interaction needs to take place between members.

## Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions

### Small and Emerging Refugee Communities Focus Group Questions

Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Total No: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part 1: Demographic Data

Gender

Female  Male

Age range

16-24   
25-40   
41-60   
60+

Country of birth

Sudan  Tanzania  Liberia  Iran   
Iraq  Burundi  Sierra Leone  Egypt

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity

Sudan  Tanzania  Liberia  Iran   
Iraq  Burundi  Sierra Leone  Egypt

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Year of arrival in Australia

2000   
2001   
2002   
2003   
2004   
2005   
2006   
2007

Visa Type

Refugee

Family

Unknown

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Current Postcode

3073

3074

3075

3076

Other \_\_\_\_\_

## **Part 2: Survey Questions**

### *Community Support*

What are the benefits of belonging to your community? (What type of support do you get from your community? eg information, advice, social)

### *Migration & Settlement*

How has migrating to Australia impacted on the community? There may be positive and negative impacts

(eg loss of community elders or other members, dispersed settlement leading to difficulties in coming together etc)

### **Strengthening Your Community**

Are there issues/ areas where your community would like additional support? If so what are these issues? In what ways should assistance be provided? (eg what resources might be needed?)

Do some of these strategies involve creating greater better linkages with the wider Australian community? If so, how do you think this could happen?

Are there any other comments, questions or issues that you would like to raise?

### **For Worker Use Only**

What issues need to be followed up?

What actions were taken to address these needs?

### Appendix 3: Individual Interview Questions

#### Small and Emerging Refugee Communities Interview Questions

Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part 1: Demographic Data

What is your sex?

Female  Male

What is your age range?

16-24

25-40

41-60

60+

In what country were you born?

Sudan  Tanzania  Liberia  Iran   
Iraq  Burundi  Sierra Leone  Egypt

Other \_\_\_\_\_

In what year did you arrive in Australia? \_\_\_\_\_

What Visa Type did you arrive in Australia under (if known)?

Refugee

Family

Spouse

Unknown

Other \_\_\_\_\_

What level of education, skills and or qualifications have you gained both here and overseas?  
(These skills can be formal or informal)

## **Part 2: Survey Questions**

### *Community Support*

Does your community still come together for meetings, support and celebrations in Australia and if so in what way? If not, why not?

Are there any difficulties for the community to come together here and if so what are these difficulties?

What type of support do you get from your community? (eg information, advice, social or other)

### *Migration & Settlement*

Do you think coming to Australia has had any positive impacts on the community and if so what?

Have there been any negative impacts on the community and if so what?

Has the separation or loss of family, friends, community elders and other community members impacted on how the community is able to support each other here and if so how?

Small numbers of the community have been settled in different parts of Australia and Victoria. Has this impacted on the community and if so how?

### **Strengthening Your Community**

What resources do you think are needed to help strengthen your community? (eg information, support workers, government grants etc)

Are there particular issues where additional support in your community is needed? If so what are these issues? What is the best way to provide support to your community?

Would you like to become involved in the wider Australian community? If not why not? If so, in what ways would you like to become involved?

Are there any other comments, questions or issues that you would like to raise?

What issues need to be followed up?

What actions were taken to address these needs?