Submission in response to the Department for Victorian Communities discussion paper:

'Patterns of volunteering in emerging communities'

June 2005

About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering in Australia. Its mission is to represent the diverse views and needs of the volunteer movement while promoting the activity of volunteering as one of enduring social, cultural and economic value.

Volunteering Australia receives funding from the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) under the National Secretariat Program (NSP) to represent the interests of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

Volunteering Australia's member organisations consist of the state and territory volunteering peak bodies, which in turn represent volunteer-involving organisations and interested individuals. Volunteering Australia works closely with a large network of regional volunteer resource centre's (VRC's), other peaks and not-for-profit organisations across all sectors.

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1. Introduction

Volunteering in Australia

Volunteering is a diverse activity that delivers significant economic and social benefits. The most recent statistics available from the ABS indicate that 34.4 per cent of the Australian population volunteered within the previous 12 months[1]. Surveys into participation rates of volunteering have consistently shown increases in the rate of volunteering in Australia over the past decade.

Various estimates (using different methodologies) measure the economic value of volunteering in the tens of billions. Duncan Ironmonger estimates that Australian volunteers perform $42 billion of unpaid labour each year[2]. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has estimated the value of Australians' volunteer activity at up to $31 billion per annum[3].

In Victoria, the economic value of volunteering has been estimated at $10 billion each year[4].

The benefits of volunteering are of course not confined to its economic value. Volunteering is an important contributor to social capital, the measure of the connectedness and functionality of our communities.

Volunteering and CALD communities

Volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds make an enormous contribution to the Australian community. However, this tends to go largely unnoticed and unquantified due to the informal nature of much 'CALD' volunteering.

While recent research in this area is most welcome, CALD volunteering (particularly in emerging communities) remains a largely under-researched area. The research supporting the Department for Victorian Communities strategy will make an important contribution to the literature.

While many of the research supports and gives weight to what we know about CALD volunteering, there is important new knowledge emerging

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[1] ABS (2002) *General Social Survey,* pg 15
[2] Ironmonger, D. (2000) 'Measuring volunteering in economic terms', pg 56
[3] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2000) 'Unpaid work and the Australian economy', pg 43
[4] Ironmonger, D. & Soupourmas, F. (2002) Giving time: The economic and social value of volunteering in Victoria, pg 29

from it. This relates to knowledge about specific cultural groups, relationships between generalist and ethnic-specific volunteering

Future research might usefully focus on investigating generational differences within ethnic groups, length of residence and levels of identification with the culture of origin would be of interest, along with preferences for modes of communication (receiving information and interactions with government and other agencies).

Definition of formal volunteering

The discussion paper reflects Volunteering Australia's distinction between formal and informal volunteering.

Volunteering Australia defines formal volunteering as an activity which takes place through not for profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:

- To be of benefit to the community;
- Of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion;
- For no financial payment; and
- In designated volunteer positions only.[5]

The elements of the definition make volunteering a unique activity that is distinguishable from a number of forms of unpaid work, such as caring, work experience and community service orders.

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[5] Definition of *Formal Volunteering* was developed by Volunteering Australia in 1997 through consultation with the volunteer sector, the unions and government.

2. Main findings

Current patterns of volunteering

- *From your own detailed knowledge and experience of working in this area, how would you:*
  - *Assess the accuracy of this part of the findings?*
  - *Translate the messages in this finding into practical proposals for government action to support existing and future volunteering in emerging communities?*

Many of the findings of the research presented in the discussion paper are supported by Volunteering Australia's experience.

Our work with migrant resource centres supports the idea that settlement services are a focal point for CALD volunteers. The crucial role of settlement services has also been alluded to in some research[6]. Because of the importance of settlement services to new migrants, these services can form a key strategic point for Government action in supporting volunteering in emerging communities. Migrant resource centre's are also worth targeting because of their role in supporting settlement services and the cross-cultural links they generate.

We have been aware for some time that participation by members of emerging communities in informal volunteering is common. Research to date has suggested that in many CALD communities, (informal) volunteering is not identified as 'volunteering' in the European/American tradition but as 'helping out' which may or may not be culturally inherent. The research outlined in the discussion paper expands on these themes to present valuable new knowledge about a number of CALD community's relationship to the concept of volunteering.

It is equally well known (anecdotally and in the literature on volunteering) that participation in formal volunteering among CALD communities is low, and that the notion of formal volunteering can be a remote or threatening concept for some communities. Again, the DVC findings reinforce these ideas.

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[6] Mansouri, F. & Bagdas, M. (2002) *Politics of social exclusion: Refugees on Temporary Protection Visa in Victoria*, Deakin Print Services

Motivations to volunteer

- *What role should the Government play in supporting cultural maintenance?*

In the context of supporting volunteering, Government can support cultural maintenance by providing material support to ethnic-specific volunteer organisations as well as the organisations that support them. This support may take a number of forms including core funding, grants or assistance with promotional materials (such as recruitment campaigns for volunteers).

Government needs to be open to building relationships and providing support via personal contact between parties. This might mean a lot of face to face meetings to overcome potential language, literacy and confidence issues.

As relationships with CALD people and their organisations become established, Government might consider investing in members of the CALD community to become spokespeople promoting positive volunteering messages.

Finally, Government needs to commit to working in genuine partnerships with communities, and not be perceived by communities as imposing their wishes.

- *In your view what are the most important motivations that Government should bear in mind in developing ways to support volunteering in emerging communities?*

The research refers to the use of formal volunteering as a pathway to study and employment.

This motivation may provide some impetus to encourage CALD communities to become more involved in formal volunteering.

3. Key barriers to volunteering

- *Is there anything that Government can/should do to support people who are newly arrived to consider volunteering?*

The discussion paper identifies settlement services as an early and profoundly important resource for newly arrived migrants. These migrants will often come in to contact with volunteers from their own ethnic group working for settlement services. In itself this sends a powerful message about community cohesion and the value of getting involved as a volunteer.

Resourcing and other supports for settlement services would be a logical step to maintaining this very beneficial role in promoting volunteering.

The state government can also assist in making volunteering accessible to newly arrived migrants by lobbying the federal government to promote volunteering more actively as a means of satisfying mutual obligation requirements.

Government may also consider assisting generalist organisations with targeted volunteer recruitment campaigns which are known to be helpful in attracting CALD volunteers to organisations.

- *From your experience, is there a point at which people are more 'ready' to volunteer?*

The key distinction here is between formal and informal volunteering involvements. Because informal volunteering practices are inherent in many CALD communities, many people from CALD backgrounds are likely to volunteer in ethnic specific organisations from an early stage.

Formal volunteering, particularly in generalist organisations, is likely to require some English language skills as a minimum, and perhaps other skills. Literacy and numeracy skills vary markedly within and between CALD communities and should not be overlooked as a barrier to formal volunteering.

- *In your experience, what do you think people from emerging communities might look for in a volunteering experience outside their own community?*

Volunteering Australia is increasingly working with CALD volunteers, volunteer organizations involving CALD volunteers, and migrant resource centre's. Volunteering Australia is also involved in conducting research into CALD volunteering.

Our experience has shown that CALD volunteers are often seeking ways to connect with the wider community and to access skills and pathways to employment. They are also seeking volunteering opportunities that allow them to make a genuine contribution, rather than being made to feel a token CALD participant.

4. Strategies to support and encourage volunteering

- *What overall comments would you make about the approaches being suggested?*

A coordinated approach to engaging CALD communities is recommended. There is an ever increasing government and nonprofit presence working to promote volunteering in CALD communities. This is to be commended. However, lack of information sharing potentially undermines the goals of various programs. In particular, CALD communities may find it difficult to navigate different messages and approaches from outside organisations.

If it is not possible to work in active partnership, a commitment across these organisations to an ongoing conversation would assist to ensure messages are consistent and resources used to best advantage in promoting and supporting volunteering in emerging and established communities.

5. References

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