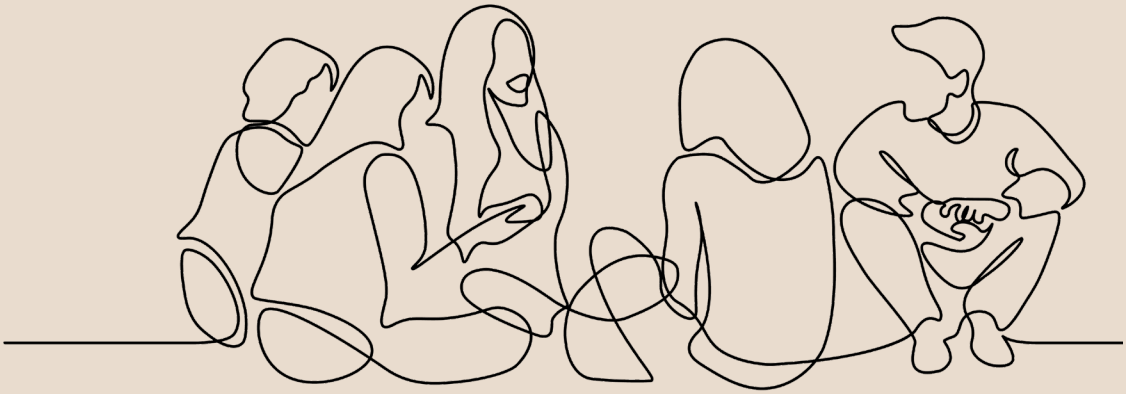
THE STORY PROJECT

Australian Multiculturalism Through the Prism of (Informal) Volunteering

written by Heba Al Adawy



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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.

Volunteering Australia would like to acknowledge and thank the research participants who offered their valuable time and insights. We would also like to acknowledge the larger cultural and faith-based networks in which the participants were embedded in, and from which they drew their insights. In developing this report, Volunteering Australia has taken into account the preferences of the research participants with respect to anonymity and acknowledgement. While some have been acknowledged by their name with their consent, other participants have been de-identified – along with any formal organisations that they may be associated with – and rendered through their choice of pseudonyms*.

Volunteering Australia would also like to acknowledge the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies, the representatives on the National Strategy for Volunteering as well as the Volunteer Management Activity Working Groups. Their feedback, at different junctures, helped push the research in constructive directions. Finally, The Story Project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Scanlon Foundation. We are grateful for this partnership that allowed The Story Project to germinate and arrive to fruition.

* Indicates the use of a pseudonym

This report has been developed by Volunteering Australia and funded by the Scanlon Foundation.

ABOUT VOLUNTEERING AUSTRALIA

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected and resilient communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

ABOUT THE SCANLON FOUNDATION

The Scanlon Foundation was established in 2001 with the aim to enhance and foster social cohesion within Australia. It was formed on a view that Australia, with the exception of Australia's First Peoples, is and always will be a migrant nation. The Scanlon Foundation aspires to see Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous, and cohesive nation particularly related to the transition of migrants into Australian Society.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteering is an important means through which a sense of community is constituted in Australia and beyond. It can have multiple conceptualisations and motivations that may be faith-based and culturally nuanced. Between September 2021 and May 2022, The Story Project endeavoured to capture the breadth of activities and practices among multicultural Australians that entail 'time given freely for the common good.' Whereas dominant understandings of 'volunteering' include formal, role-based positions within volunteer involving organisations such as not-for-profit organisations and registered charities, other forms of community activities may be more fluid, unbounded, and value driven.

Drawing upon findings of The Story Project, the report moves beyond a deficit-based approach to volunteering within multicultural contexts. In other words, it does not begin from the premise that volunteering exists in scarcity within multicultural communities. Instead, it highlights that volunteering often exists in abundance but may be invisibilised. As such, it thrives within the informal domain – and, in particular, within cultural associations and faith-based settings.

Some of the key insights of the report include:

- Volunteering among multicultural communities may be statistically under-represented in official data. Capturing the breadth of these voluntary activities necessitates a more expansive definition of informal volunteering.
    - Current categorisations of 'informal volunteering' in survey data primarily and more dominantly include[1]: 'emotional work,' 'domestic maintenance' and 'running errands.' However, current categorisations may be insufficient and may exclude other forms of informal voluntary work.

- Informal volunteering can exist in abundance within faith-based settings as well as cultural associations. Faith-based networks and cultural associations, therefore, require greater attention as sites of informal volunteering.
- Informal volunteering may be characterised as primarily value-based and relational activities. They may be relational activities *in nature* ('emotional support' and 'care') as well as relational *in their processes* – i.e., as skilled and structured activities (teaching, auditing, administration) in sites that operate relationally more than bureaucratically.
- The relational nature of the activities may not exclude the use of professional skills (such as tutoring of language or scripture, administrative management, accounting) in cultural and religious settings. Furthermore, informal volunteering may be role-based (with designated functions) as well as fluid (irrespective of designated functions). They may be regularised and structured as well as un-regularised and unbound (in terms of time commitments).

- Conceptions of 'volunteering' can be culturally nuanced, with many parallels across traditions. As a result, such forms of volunteering can often be invisibilised and must be understood on its own terms.
  - Individuals from different cultural and faith-based backgrounds may associate alternative terms and concepts with their voluntary activities: these activities may be seen as a fulfillment of faith; an act of service without any personal benefit attached; a form of cultural obligation; or as an extension of kinship ties to include friends and community members. They may also be construed as 'interests' or 'hobbies' rather than 'volunteering activities'.
  - They may associate volunteering with a form of altruism, with no resultant concept of material or personal benefit attached.

- Rather than being understood in instrumental terms or through a market-based logic (as a means for greater employability or social network connections), these activities may be conceived as an end in of itself. The end goal is the significance of the act itself – as service to the community or as spiritual fulfillment by transcending oneself in the process.

- Whereas formal volunteering may be pursued as a pathway to employment, informal volunteering within faith-based and cultural sites seems to have an ambivalent relationship with the question of employability.
    - This ambivalence is a feature of the way in which the voluntary activities are understood by the participants as 'pure service.'
    - Where participants recognise the 'coincidental benefits' of culturally specific or faith-based volunteering as a pathway to employment, they may feel inhibited in recounting their activities due to potentially prejudicial treatment by employers in hiring.
    - In turn, job application processes can have the tendency to emphasise 'skills' rather than 'interests' – which has the potential to exclude the domain of informal voluntary activities.
    - The necessity of platforming informal volunteering as a pathway to employment may be different for at-risk or vulnerable migrant communities versus settled and established communities.

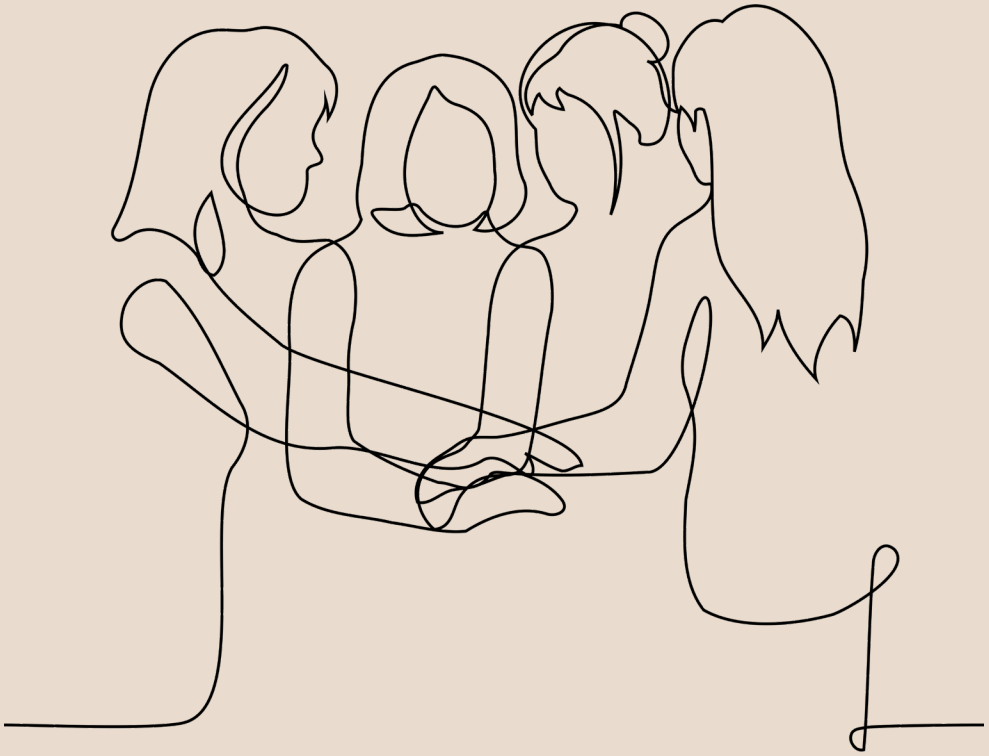
- Volunteers within cultural and faith-based sites often seek collective recognition for their engagements, rather than individual recognition of their accomplishments.
    - The idea of actively seeking individual recognition for voluntary work may be viewed as a form of 'ostentation' from a faith-based perspective.
    - Volunteers, nevertheless, may seek collective recognition for their engagements – which may be ideational as well as material.

    - Ideational recognition involves an acknowledgement of the socio-political concerns faced by a community, or a platform to showcase one's cultural identity or religious ethos to the outside community.
    - Material recognition entails the provision of support to enable the longevity of the voluntary activities. For instance, volunteers working within cultural associations may seek the provision of space from other community-based organisations to platform their rituals and festivals. They may also seek expertise from individuals in mainstream not-for-profit organisations to help set up and structure their activities.

- Informal volunteering is a means through which community is constituted.
    - Informal volunteering provides social capital and a sense of belonging to its participants during different phases of their lives – in early settlement in Australia or in early parenthood.
    - Cultural associations and faith-based networks are important sites of informal volunteering and play a key role in the early settlement of emerging immigrant communities. For example, in assisting with housing, or in maintaining the rituals and traditions of diverse communities.
    - In both instances (of early settlement in Australia and early parenthood), individuals may seek greater engagement within culturally familiar settings. This often leads to volunteering in culturally specific sites – such as faith-based networks or cultural associations.

- The relationship between informal and formal volunteering may be understood as a continuum – visualised through a volunteering gradient (Figure 4) rather than as dichotomous domains.
    - Informal volunteering may be easy to initiate due to an absence of red tape but difficult to sustain due to a shortage of funds and material resources.

- Informal volunteering in multicultural settings can often exist as early forms of institution-building. It may transition to formal volunteering in order to ensure sustainability and longevity, whereas formal volunteering may blend into informal volunteering when relationships turn personal or familial.
- Informal and formal volunteering may draw upon each other for social capital, as well as material and ideational support.
- Existing relations between formal and informal volunteering require an in-depth study to develop a policy approach geared towards uplifting the whole of the volunteering ecosystem.



PART I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The Story Project highlights the rich canvas of volunteering beyond volunteer involving organisations – taking place within faith-based networks, cultural associations, neighbourhood clubs, as well as in moments of transition – when formal volunteering positions blend into longer term relations and friendships. Drawing upon The Story Project, this report raises two key questions: How can Australian multiculturalism be understood through diverse experiences of volunteering? And how can policymakers better *recognise* and *support* informal volunteering within multicultural settings? Responding to this question of 'better recognition and support,' the report takes an interpretive approach to discuss localised understandings of volunteering, the motivations of the volunteers, and the significance of their activities in their lives and their communities. This interpretive methodological approach is predicated on the notion that better support can be enabled through a grounded understanding of what constitutes the domain of informal volunteering; its significance for its participants; its relationship with "formal" institutionalised volunteering, as well as its contributions towards social good.

In what follows, Part I of the report highlights the significance of understanding Australian multiculturalism through the prism of volunteering; Part II focuses on the cultural nuances of informal volunteering within multicultural communities; Part III focuses on informal volunteering as a means of building community.' Finally, the last section, Part IV, ends with preliminary reflections on how the policy sector might better recognise and support the informal domain of volunteering among multicultural communities.

Methodology

This report offers a broad canvas of informal volunteering among communities from multicultural backgrounds in Australia. It draws upon seventeen in-depth research interviews carried out in two phases: from October 2021 to February 2022 (Phase I); and from March 2022 to May 2022 (Phase II). Participants in Phase I were engaged through a snowballing technique based on second and third-hand referrals of community leaders and organisations working within different cultural and faith-based sites. Participants were also located through success stories of volunteering profiled in the media and through an identification of primary sites where informal or non-dominant forms of volunteering occur. The sites included faith-based organisations, such as mosques, churches, gurdwaras; cultural associations, such as the Telegu Association; the Pashtun Association and the Hungarian Association; broad identity-based sites, such as parents' circles and playgroups; and, finally, interest-based sites, such as community gardens and neighbourhood clubs. In Phase II, additional research participants were recruited through a call on social media, with in-depth interviews following preliminary questionnaires to assess their engagements against a broad criterion of activities defined as 'time freely given for the common good'.

The interviews were drawn from a wide-ranging national sample, encompassing residents based in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Western Australia. The cultural communities covered in this research include Pakistani, Indian, Arab, Afghan, Hungarian, Slovakian, Colombian, Chinese, Nigerian, and Iranian-Belgian. The faith-based affiliations of the participants include Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh. In representing the cultural diversity of the research participants covered in The Story Project, a clarificatory note on terminologies is required here. The report uses the phrase 'culturally diverse communities' and 'multicultural Australians' descriptively without necessarily ascribing to the categorisations of CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse

communities). In doing so, it attempts to address some of the limitations and lacunae in the more formalised designation of 'CALD'.

In recent operationalisations of the term, CALD for example covers Australians who are either born overseas, speak a language other than English at home, or lack proficiency in English. However, as emphasised by Diversity Atlas, the CALD designation may sometimes "collapse[..] the nuances of cultural identifications into one blunt category" as well as inadvertently privilege the idea of an Anglo-Celtic mainstream.[2] Addressing some of these limitations, this research takes a broad approach to cover communities of multicultural backgrounds in Australia. This includes Australians who are overseas born as well as locally born; individuals who are part of emerging migrant communities (under 10 years of migration) as well as established communities (20 years plus of migration); it includes communities that speak multiple languages other than English at home, as well Australians who are locally born, proficient only in English but still raised and socialised in culturally specific ways. Furthermore, whilst drawing out specific insights from culturally specific and faith-based volunteering, the objective of the study is not to essentialise perceptions of alterity. Rather, it is to make a point about the different ways of community engagement that – in the context of this report – pertain to members from multicultural backgrounds, but nevertheless, retain broader resonance in society.

The research adopts an interpretive approach to policy analysis, drawing upon Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz, with a focus on the meaning-making practices of the research participants as well as the processes through which people construe, understand, or make sense of their lived events, relationships, and activities.[3] Drawing upon interpretive policy analysis, the research takes discourses – both oral, written, and non-verbal – to be important evidentiary sources of policy meanings. The interviews, therefore, are conducted with an ethnographic sensibility, paying attention to people's life stories to better understand the nature of their voluntary activities, their motivations, and concerns. The research also builds upon emotional

meta-data in the interviews to explore further conceptual openings – for instance, the excitement, reluctance, and opposition of the research participants to be named.

Drawing upon in-depth interviews, the report highlights insights that are iterative and cumulative, as well as unique and single-sited. For the cumulative insights, the report relies on a multimodal technique of analysis termed as 'mapping for exposure and intertextuality' wherein various sources and 'sites' are analysed as genres of evidence for corresponding themes.[4] Since the project draws upon multiple 'sites' that are distinct from each other – faith based settings, cultural associations, community gardens, and sporting clubs – the report explores the variety of meanings within each site as well as across the sites horizontally to explore parallels as well as comparisons.[5] At the same time, emphasis is placed on diversity as well as nuance rather a than triangulation of data at the expense of multiplicity. The emphasis on multiplicity is particularly relevant in analysis across sites that are least comparable – such as faith-based organisations and sporting clubs – as well as sites that are more comparable – such as church, mosque, gurdwara or cultural associations.

Finally, the methodology of interpretive policy analysis, as undertaken in this project, relies on 'concepts' as well as insights that emerge from the setting, through the language and understandings of the research participants. Since 'formal' and 'informal' volunteering are relevant categories of analysis in policy settings, the report continues to use these distinctions – albeit informed by an interpretive approach. This means that instead of pre-determining the constituent features of a concept a priori and 'testing' in the field site, it chooses to work iteratively to understand the 'informal' voluntary domain through the situated meanings and practices of its participants. The objective of this report is not to devise new terminologies. Many participants in this project, in fact, straddle both spaces – volunteering with mainstream, volunteer involving organisations, as well as informally in domains outside of it. Rather, the objective is to better understand the defining characteristics of the informal domain on the terms of its participants, and from the perspective of what is most meaningful and significant to them.

Background: Multiculturalism in Australia

Australia is home to one of the world's oldest surviving cultures in the world, encompassing a historic cultural diversity of the First Nations People who have lived in the land through centuries, speaking over 250 languages and 800 dialects.[6] Diversity has been a core feature of life in Country, persisting despite the violent history of colonisation. Although early settlement policies primarily favored Britons, the Second World War marked a turning point in Government sponsored settlement schemes.[7] In the aftermath of WWII, the Department of Immigration was formally established to address concerns relating to critical labor shortages and the post-war reconstruction of the economy. A primary concern in the early immigration policies was the ability of immigrants to speak English, and therefore assimilate into Australian society. Whilst preference was still given to Britain as a primary source for immigrants, several assisted migration schemes began to open for Europeans sponsored by relatives already in Australia, and those from Southern Europe, particularly, Italy, Greece, and the Former Yugoslavia.[8]

Despite the emphasis on settling Anglo-Celtic, and later European communities in Australia, non-European communities also maintained their presence in other forms, dating back to the 1850s. The gold rush of the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, witnessed a rush of Chinese immigrants in the form of indentured or contract labourers.[9] On the other hand, Afghan cameleers originating from western parts of British India (now Pakistan and Afghanistan) were also shipped to Australia to assist in the exploration of the Australian outback.[10] Many of them stayed, intermingling with and marrying First Peoples, and playing a key role in developing the pastoral industry in rural inlands and establishing rural Ghantowns.[11]

By the late 1950s, the official climate began to change, with several changes in federal immigration laws. Non-Europeans with 15 years of residence could become Australian citizens and "European only" immigration was now viewed as being 'out of step' with

the post-war realities.[12] The passing of the *Racial Discrimination Act* in 1975 sought to undo the vestiges of the White Australia Policy, paving the way for progressively more inclusive immigration policies that admitted 'distinguished and highly qualified' non-Europeans. In the decades since, globalisation and the increased exchange of goods, ideas, and information have led to a diversification of the labour market in Australia as well as resultant changes in the demographic composition.[13]

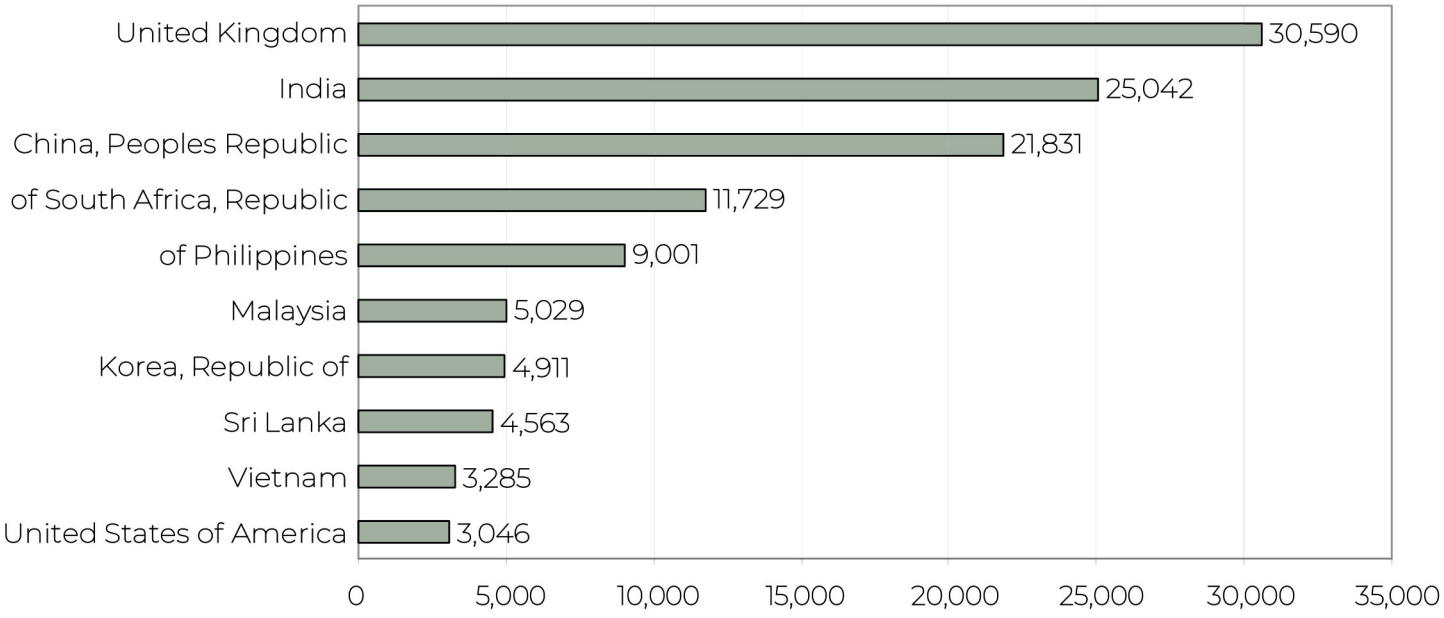
Over the past ten years, permanent and long-term arrivals from the Asian region have become more prevalent. By 2008-09, the top ten countries of origin for migrants – apart from the United Kingdom – included India, China, Philippines, Malaysia, Korea, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. There is also a growing trend of migration from emerging African communities, with South Africa featuring among the top ten countries of origin for migrants (see Figure 1).[14] Along with economic migration, there have also been several waves of conflict-driven, humanitarian migration to Australia. These have included Italians during World War I; Croatians during the two World Wars; Lebanese during the Civil War in the 1970s in addition to earlier waves in the nineteenth century; and the East Timorese in the 1990s.[15]

Today, as a nation, Australia has come a long way in terms of its multiculturalism, its refutation of the White Australia Policy, and its immigration policies, which have contributed to a diverse demographic composition.[16]

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2021, 29.1 per cent of Australia's population were born overseas, amounting to 7.5 million people resident in Australia who were born overseas.[17] This captures only a slice of cultural diversity present in Australia, as the number of Australians with one or more parent born overseas is much greater. In the 2016 census, for instance, 34 per cent of Australians had both parents born overseas.[18] Additionally, the latest Census data of 2021 also highlights the religious diversity in Australia, with Christianity remaining the most commonly reported religion (43.9 per cent of the population); Islam as the second

largest religion of 3.2 per cent of the total population, closely followed by Hinduism (2.7 per cent).[19] This diversity is also reflected in the 2022 Federal Election, with 13 Members of Parliament hailing from non-Indigenous and non-European backgrounds and the number of Asian Australian parliamentarians doubling from four to nine.[20] Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic briefly disrupted international migration patterns, experts continue to anticipate an emphasis on skilled migration to meet labour shortages in Australia, and highlight the importance of migrants in the COVID-19 response, many of whom work in critical sectors.[21]

Figure 1: Report on the Migration Program 2008–09[22]



Australian multiculturalism through the prism of volunteering

Research on Australian multiculturalism can be broadly divided into two strands: one that examines its social implications and the other that highlights its economic contributions. Several scholars have examined the changing character of Australian neighbourhoods into multicultural enclaves, as well as questions related to national identity and belonging. Others have explored the social integration of humanitarian entrants, showcasing how refugees and their children do integrate over time as evidenced in a 'convergence toward the Australian average in indicators such as unemployment, labour force participation, income, housing, volunteering, education, etc.' (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010).[23] Australian research also suggests that immigrant youth, unlike other OECD regions, do not live their lives within ethnic or religious social enclaves, but have broad friendship networks with other immigrant and non-immigrant youth in their neighbourhoods. This is despite some social networks become narrower with age due to the religious and dietary restrictions of the individuals.[24]

While challenges pertaining to social integration and racism remain,[25] a series of Social Cohesion Surveys conducted by the Scanlon Foundation since 2007 have found a positive attitude exists towards multiculturalism. The percentage of survey respondents noting that 'it is a good thing for a society to be made up of people from different cultures' has consistently been above 80 per cent, with only few sub-groups, including One Nation supporters, below this level.[26]

According to the latest 'Mapping Social Cohesion' survey in 2021, 84 per cent (82 per cent in July 2020) of the survey respondents agreed that 'immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures;' 86 per cent (83 per cent) agreed that 'immigrants are generally good for the economy'; and 75 per cent (70 per cent) disagren ed with the proposition that 'immigrants take jobs away.'[27] Furthermore, 90-92 per cent of respondents between 2018 to 2021 have indicated a

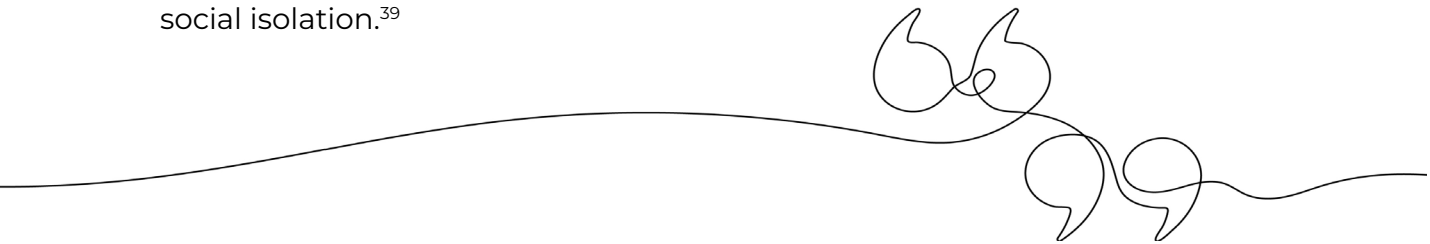
'sense of belonging in Australia' to a moderate or great extent; and 85- 89 per cent noted that they 'take pride in the Australian way of life and culture.'[28]

Research has also highlighted the economic contributions of multiculturalism – in particular, of Australia's migration policies.[29] Carrington and Marshall, for instance, pay attention to the ways in which regional settlement schemes of humanitarian migrants have made economic contributions in the region.[30] Furthermore, as evidenced by a survey on the Characteristics of Recent Migrants carried out by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), new arrivals and emerging communities have strong economic contributions to offer. In November 2019, 68 per cent of Australia's 1.9 million recent migrants and temporary residents were found to be employed, with a labour participation rate of 72 per cent. Overall, men were more likely to be employed full-time (at the rate of 90 per cent) than women (at the rate of 63 per cent).[31] Additionally, ABS estimates income tax from recent migrants alone to top more than $80 billion, and International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates show Australia's current migration program will likely add 0.5-1 percentage points to annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth from 2020-2050.[32]

While Australian multiculturalism has been studied from the lens of economic contribution and the challenges of social integration, there is more research needed to understand the processes and practices through which emerging and established communities of diverse upbringing establish their sense of connection with the country. In this context, volunteering acts as a nodal point that connects and establishes community. As such, it serves as an important prism to view and understand Australian multiculturalism. As an act that entails 'time freely given for the common good,'[33] volunteering extends to every corner of society, both as a formal activity with volunteer involving organisations and groups, as well as an informal activity occurring outside formal structures. In fact, as an act that is central to the everyday cultural life of First Nations People in Australia, volunteering – albeit differentially conceived as 'community giving' – may be considered the oldest mode of connecting socially and establishing a connection with Country.[34]

As 'time willingly given for the common good without financial gain,'[35] volunteering occupies the intermediary and sometimes transitional space between employment and unemployment. This intermediary space, nevertheless, offers significant contributions towards the economy. The ABS estimates that the fiscal contribution of volunteering to not-for-profit organisations amounted to over $14.6 billion in 2006-07.[36] Research has found that volunteering is critical in encouraging economic participation, and often leads to employment by inculcating critical transferrable skills and meaningful professional development. The contributions of volunteers span across sectors ranging from aged care and disability support, to sports and emergency services, with each sector engaging volunteers as part of their critical and strategic workforce. Furthermore, there is also evidence of volunteers contributing to the growth of regional economies. The Economic Value of Volunteering in Victoria Report, released in 2012 suggests that regional Victorians contributed approximately $2,012 million dollars to their communities through volunteering.[37]

In addition to its economic contributions, volunteering also merits attention for a more holistic understanding of social relations operating outside of market forces. Evidence has indicated the numerous wellbeing benefits of volunteering, where it has played a major role in mitigating social isolation and loneliness, and in contributing towards community resilience. Recent studies have indicated that 96 per cent of volunteers report feeling happier as a result of their voluntary engagements, while 95 per cent of volunteers connect their engagements with a sense of wellbeing.[38] The experience of helping others not only has personal benefits, but also enables greater community connection. Volunteering, therefore, serves as a rich source of social capital, allowing for the development of meaningful relationships and the reduction of social isolation.[39]



Volunteering Among Multicultural Communities

Considering the numerous benefits of volunteering towards the economy and society, two questions of pertinence emerge: in what ways is volunteering prevalent among multicultural communities? And how might policymakers better recognise and support the volunteering ecosystem that caters to diverse communities? Recent studies and surveys have sought to capture this trend – but the data largely pertains to formal volunteering taking place within the context of mainstream volunteer involving organisations. According to the ABS General Social Service Survey 2019, of the 3.6 million people over the age of 15 years who volunteer, almost a third were born overseas. Furthermore, 18.9 per cent of people whose main language is other than English volunteer formally through an organisation.[40] In 2019, a study conducted by Volunteering Australia and the Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) sought to gauge the impact of volunteering in the settlement sector and its benefits for newly arrived migrants. To this end, an online survey circulated by the organisations found that volunteers played a critical role in the delivery of key support programs and services within the settlement sector, with many of them having lived experiences and shared languages in common with the newly arrived migrants. It further highlighted how volunteers brought a 'diversity dividend' to their workplace by building a stronger, more resilient and respectful culture therein. The study found that 65 per cent of volunteer involving organisations surveyed recruited volunteers from a migrant or a refugee background, 23 per cent recruited from only a migrant background, and 5 per cent recruited only from a refugee background.[41] Furthermore, the study found that volunteering by members of newly migrant or refugee communities often proved to be an effective way of improving English skills and gaining professional development opportunities for future employability.

In contrast to formal volunteering, the statistical data on informal volunteering among culturally diverse communities is scarce. According to the ABS, approximately 27.3 per cent of culturally and linguistically diverse Australians (according to formal

categorisations of the CALD designation) volunteer informally.[42] Another research study conducted in 2005 found that 72 per cent of the participants surveyed had volunteered in informal settings as opposed to 21 per cent in formal settings. Participants included members of emerging and established communities in Australia – with an average contribution of one to two days a week spent in voluntary activities in informal settings.[43] Notwithstanding these statistics, the actual landscape of informal volunteering among culturally diverse communities is likely to be more extensive. One limitation of official statistics may pertain to formal categorisations of CALD based on country of birth and non-Anglo-Celtic languages spoken. This may exclude other identifiers of diversity – for instance, Australians who may be biracial or locally born and English-speaking but still socialised in culturally specific ways.

Definitions of what may constitute as informal volunteering may also limit what is officially captured or not. Whereas 'formal volunteering' has relevance, as a category, in organisational settings (with informal activities understood as the absence of 'formal'), there is – to date – no consensual definition of what the 'informal' terrain may entail. Some scholars have defined informal volunteering as community activities that are 'ad hoc' or 'spontaneous'; while others have taken informal volunteering as activities that are unstructured, unregularised, or un-institutionalised (i.e., occurring outside the mediation of an organisation or an institution).[44] In contrast to these categorisations, a more recent research study by Volunteer West has offered a more comprehensive categorisation of 'formal' versus 'informal' volunteering. Whereas the former is characterised as 'role based' volunteering that is contractual and bounded with a set input of time and labour, the latter is taken as 'fluid volunteering,' defined more as a way of life, and a way of 'being' rather than 'doing'.[45] Nevertheless, typical sub-categories of 'informal volunteering' in the official data, such as the ABS General Social Survey 2019, tend to be as follows: 'emotional support,' 'domestic work,' 'unpaid childcare', 'home maintenance,' 'personal care', 'transportation or running of errands', 'lobbying,' 'community assistance'. Among these categories, 'emotional work,' 'domestic maintenance' and 'running errands' feature as the most dominant.

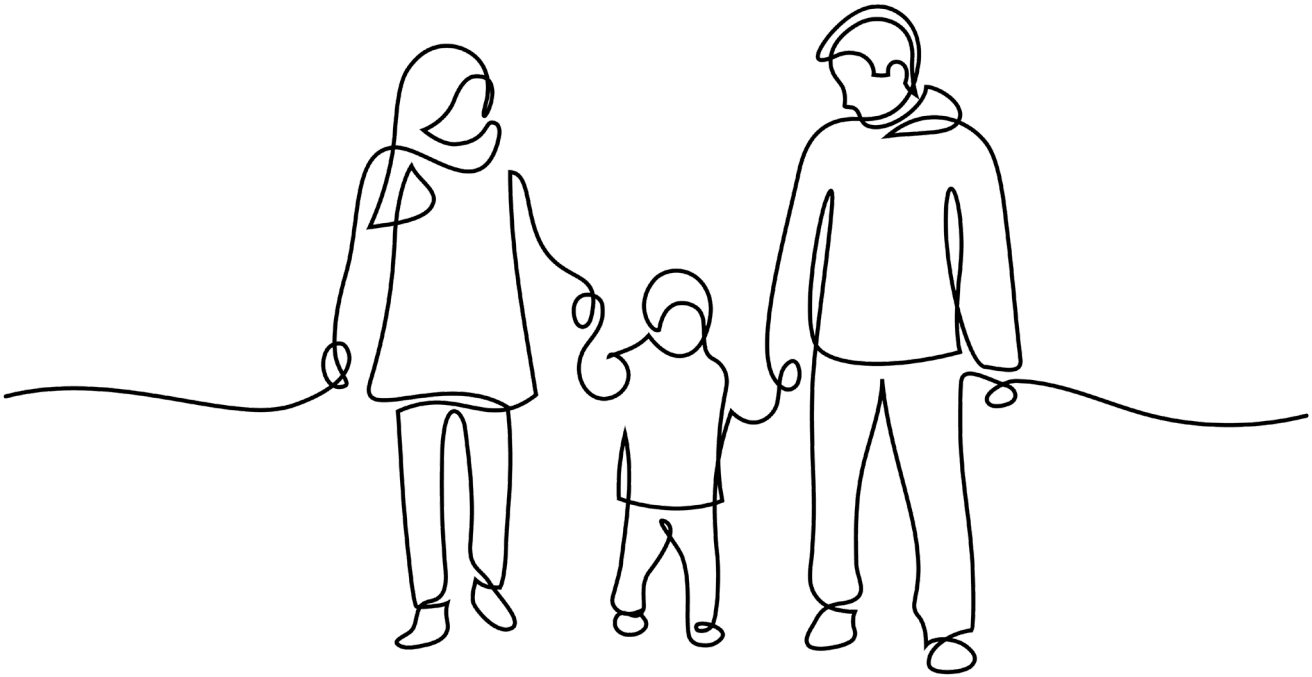
However, current categorisations may be insufficient and may exclude other forms of informal voluntary work.[46]

As the findings of The Story Project indicate, descriptions of what may constitute as informal volunteering can be extensive as well as invisibilised. They may include informal acts of care and support that are unbounded and 'fluid' – taking place irrespective of time and irrespective of designated roles in an organisation. In these instances, informal volunteering often also 'spills out' of 'formal' volunteering roles, particularly as the participants establish deeper ties of friendship and conviviality with the recipients of care. At the same time, descriptions of informal volunteering can also include participation in religious and cultural rituals in a manner that is role-based and structured – such as teaching, cooking, administering, and accounting. Cultural associations and faith-based networks, then, emerge as important sites that may not be 'un-institutionalised' as such; but they may still operate in a semi-regularised basis, mediated through personal connections, networks, friendships and forms of spiritual kinship (or 'religious fellowship') rather than formal procedures of application, recruitment, and retention. In other words, they constitute as sites that operate relationally more than bureaucratically. Within these settings, voluntary work may be fluid as well as role-based, switching to conform to the requirements of a particular occasion. A more expansive categorisation of the informal volunteering domain to include both the nature of the activity (such as emotional support) as well as the site of the activities (such as cultural and religious settings) may, therefore, showcase higher rates of participation.

One may also consider the issue of cultural translation vis-à-vis the concept of volunteering in diverse communities. The findings of The Story Project suggest many of the activities may be understood through different referents such as cultural obligation, religious duty, pure service, shared love, or an extension of kinship ties. As a result, these activities may be uncaptured and invisibilised as 'volunteering' per se. Furthermore, even in instances where these concepts are correlated with the

terminology of 'volunteering,' they may be strongly inflected with cultural or faith-based attitudes on the question of recognition – with the latter being understood in collectivist terms rather than as individual acts of engagement to be acknowledged and celebrated.

In what follows, Part I of the report will focus on the cultural nuances of volunteering that may render these activities 'invisible.' It will showcase stories that depict the religious and cultural nuances of informal volunteering as well as the motivations of different individuals as they participate in these activities. Subsequently, Part II will focus on the value of informal volunteering, its role in establishing a sense of community, and its relationship with the idea of 'institution-building.' Part III will end with preliminary reflections on how the policy sector might better recognise and support the informal domain of volunteering that caters to culturally diverse communities. .



PART II: THE CULTURAL NUANCES OF VOLUNTEERING

'Why Volunteer?'

VOLUNTEERING AS AN ACT OF SHARED LOVE

When Manjula moved to Canberra in 1999 so that her husband could "try out" a new job for a year, little did she know that Australia was going to be her permanent home. Today, Manjula is the founder of a community produce garden in Canberra, an avid church volunteer, and the former President of the Telugu Association of Canberra, in addition to being a Canberra public servant and a mother of three. She defines her voluntary engagements as an act of shared love.

Prior to her move to Australia, Manjula had been trained as a special educator in India. The places that she called home had ranged from Hyderabad (India) to Singapore, with Australia featuring not so much in the horizon for her young family. It was not long after they moved to Canberra – with their two-year old daughter – that they realised that Australia may be an ideal place to bring up their children.

Settling down, however, was not easy. While her parental duties were foremost on her mind, pursuing a career in her field of special education was also proving to be an expensive prospect. "We had come on a work (and partner) visa at the time and pursuing a career in special education meant doing a bridging course which was around $15,000 to $20,000. So, I decided to let go of the option for a while," she said. Instead, Manjula began to involve herself in finding a like-minded community in Canberra

and building a sense of home in a new place. Volunteering was never a pre-meditated pursuit for her nor an alternative to employment – it simply came naturally in the process of finding friends and giving back to the community in return for the small kindnesses she encountered here.

Food and faith were her connections to home. Back in Hyderabad, Manjula was part of the church choir and led the youth ministry, in addition to her professional engagements. Now, having moved to Australia, two activities came to her naturally and instinctively: cooking meals from her country of origin and connecting with the activities of the local church. It was not long before food – both in the act of growing and harvesting as well as in the act of cooking and sharing – became the focal point of her voluntary activities inside and outside the church.

Manjula describes her journey as follows: "When we came here, there were very few (Indian) families here. And there was only one Indian grocery shop. I began to meet people I would meet at the grocery store, and also anyone else who looked Indian at the mall. We soon began to organise collective grocery trips to Sydney. There were 20 of us [families]. Each family would take a turn and bring back kilos of rice and spices – for themselves and others. Then we would have mini gatherings for dinner on Saturdays and Sundays."

One day, strolling with her young child in Belconnen, she came across a Christian bookshop and stopped to inquire about a local church in the neighbourhood. "They were very affectionate and loving. In the church, there were craft groups for women, and groups for young mums. Everyone used to volunteer. The craft groups would charge a minimal cost of $2 for the supplies. I ended up learning so much – fabric painting, wood painting, quilting." Soon Manjula decided to do her bit to give back

to the church community – one that had allowed her to find friends, connect with motherhood, and learn new crafts. Manjula decided to shift from being a regular participant in the Church activities to an active volunteer. “Every month on a third Sunday, we have church lunches. I now lead that program. And whenever it is my turn to cook, I jump at the opportunity, so that I can cook an Indian meal for everyone. It is just about serving others and giving back.”

Today, Manjula is a proud owner of a community produce garden, with an open gate policy. Manjula not only shares her produce with guests who come by, but also hosts regular gatherings bringing together different members of the community – a dentist, a psychologist, a doctor, a parent, a teacher – to share insights as well as the community produce; and to connect over a cup of tea in an organic fashion. Manjula describes how the idea came to her spontaneously over the course of cleaning her heavily weeded garden to prevent pollen allergies for her family. “I was growing some succulents and they survived. So, I thought why not set up a kitchen garden and try a new passion? I was inspired by the gardening shows I would watch in Australia: Better Homes and Gardens or Gardening Australia.”

Like her other activities in the church, the kitchen garden has developed into a project that she feels she needs to share with the wider community rather than just in her own home. “I started asking my friends to come and share a cup of tea. This turned into a weekly gathering. Then I would pluck my produce and share with the neighbours, with the church volunteers, so our garden community expanded. I soon joined a Facebook Group, Urban Homesteaders, and started posting pictures of my produce there – that if anyone were interested, they could pick it up. Then more people started turning up.”

Community gardening is now a focal point for the community and the neighbourhood.

“I saw how the church community was connecting different people from different backgrounds over a shared interest. A group for mums, for art lovers. So, I started doing the same.”

When asked what the word ‘volunteering’ meant her Manjula said,

“I would say it is an act of love. An act of shared love. We use that saying in our church as well. It is an act of love in the church as well, and then we bring it [this act] home and apply it in different settings. It is just about caring and helping others. That is the main thing.”

VOLUNTEERING AS AN ACT OF TRANSCENDING ONESELF

Gary, the Chief Executive Officer at AIM Institute of Health and Sciences, is also the founder of Helping Hands in Canberra, an initiative that began in his family kitchen informally during the 2020 bushfires and COVID-19 lockdown. The idea to cook and deliver free home-cooked meals for people came in the spur of the moment. Gary recalls being astounded to discover how many individuals and families were in need – from students to elderly people in the community.

To serve anyone and everyone who asked – without criteria or judgment – was the essence of what this initiative meant to him. But this sense of altruism, as he describes, came upon him suddenly, as a change of heart. He describes arriving in Geelong (Victoria) in 2015 "with only $1000 in his pocket and many dreams." Moving from a little village in northern Punjab to Victoria was a big cultural adjustment for him. "It was an entirely different world to me. I still remember I struggled to cope with the modern world. And I was a victim of discrimination too, but now things have changed. Australia is my home." He describes his early engagements in Australia as being primarily focused on education and career. "I will be honest," he admits. "I was not involved in any community activities, and I only wanted to build myself professionally and prove myself in that regard." This, in a nutshell, is how he described his life's worth at the time.

Then, in 2018, he found himself undergoing a change of heart. It began with his father's battle with cancer and Gary's subsequent decision to abandon his pursuit of career and advancement to care for his father in India. Spending three months in palliative care with his father made him reflect on what life was all about, and what it should be. Through his father's footsteps, it dawned upon him that life was about serving others, to work for more than himself and his family.

Gary describes his father as a local community doctor in a North Indian village who would spend days in and out serving his community. "If he had 100 Rupees,

he would give 80 Rupees to others. I did not understand it then. Looking at all the other children in private schools and luxury cars, I would always wonder: why was he spending all the money on others, and not on us?" Decades later, the privilege of spending time with his father during his last days transformed Gary's approach to life altogether. Connecting with love, as a son for a father, he found himself being irresistibly drawn to the idea of life spent in serving others – if for no other reason than to continue his father's legacy. "He always said we should do something for others – to put a smile on people's faces."

After returning to Australia, Gary found himself in the middle of one crisis unraveling after another – the 2020 bushfires followed by the COVID-19 lockdown. In an act of spontaneous inspiration, his began to cook with his family in his home kitchen. He put out a call on social media for free deliveries – "to anyone and everyone, no questions asked." It was an informal call, but he was astounded by the response. "Our inbox was flooded," he recalls in surprise.

For the first ten days, Gary continued to cook in his kitchen until the demand for meals forced him to move to a training kitchen in his office space, which they used for commercial cooking classes from time to time. "When we started, I was paying out of my pocket – my family and my office staff were the volunteers. Then we set up a GoFundMe page to cover the cost of food. The demand was so high that we were delivering close to having 8000 free meals." Today, his initiative has transitioned into a formal registered charity to ensure longevity and sustainability, but "it started as an informal activity and continued so for several months," Gary said. "I spent $70,000 from my pocket with eventually $15,000 from the ACT Government. It was simply easier to begin that way – responding to a need, with no red-tape."

Although Gary chooses to not describe himself through religious identifiers, he notes the heavy inspiration of Guru Nanak, the founder and the first Guru of Sikhism, in his family's lives. "When it comes to the spirit of giving, Guru Nanak is an inspiration in our

family, but we do not identify him with Sikhism per se. His legacy transcends religion and borders – he is remembered in India as much as Pakistan." Now Gary imbues the same spirit in his voluntary work – of serving in a manner that transcends religious and ethnic affiliations – beyond one's own community.

> **I would not want to be known as a Sikh or an Australian-Indian who is helping others. But as a human being, as a Canberran. This is what we learn from Guru Nanak and my father. The work we do is to serve others – beyond your own kin and your own community.**

SWAMCHAND SEVA – PURE SERVICE AND WILLINGNESS

Srini, who works as an Australian Public Servant on weekdays and a Telegu language teacher on weekends, describes volunteering, in his mother tongue, as "swamchand seva" – an act of pure service and pure willingness. When he moved to Queensland 20 years ago, as a postgraduate student studying Computer Science, he – like many others – was solely focused on his career goals. After finishing his education, he recalls transitioning into the professional domain easily, with his new job in the IT sector in Canberra paving the way for permanent residency and then citizenship.

Now in a new city, financial stability was not so much a challenge for him. But finding a sense of community was. He recalls being struck by how small Canberra was upon arrival, with only a few families from the South Asian subcontinent. Growing up in a joint family system in Telangana, he was accustomed to the presence of a close-knit community around him – relatives, friends, and neighbours whom he could reach out to, share concerns with, and seek advice from. "I was naturally looking for a place to stay [here in Canberra] and people I could relate to, but I just could not find them. I remember going to shopping centres on the weekends, like Woolworths and Coles, just in the anticipation that I would run into someone or connect with someone from my background. I used to just stand out there, looking for people."

Ironically, his search for connections outside grocery stores in shopping malls worked, he laughingly recalls. "I met someone from the Telegu community. Then he introduced me to another member from the community who had a friend at his workplace. That person actually offered me accommodation! Just imagine! The grueling process of finding a good accommodation made simpler through connections."

The two friends, joining with some other families in Canberra, became forerunners of the Telegu Cultural Association. “We were a very close-knit community, and we were only a few members. We started to first organise get-togethers – picnics and barbeques – and celebrate cultural events, informally. We were not a formalised association, just people getting together through word of mouth, helping each other out, and chipping in money so we could hire a venue and celebrate our festivals.”

Eventually Srini and his friends decided to register their group as a cultural association so that they could receive donations and maintain an accountable record of it. “Previously, we would help each other out and put in money from our pockets. After registration, we could have access to grants. We also established a structure, a body with designated roles.” Today the Telegu Cultural Association has no office space, but still operates primarily through the membership fees of the participants to finance the cost of activities and workshops. It has also branched out to set up language classes on the weekends, in public school venues hired by the association. Although the families are charged a minimal fee to finance the cost of the language syllabi and the rent of the venue, the teachers engaged in the school “work completely voluntarily” – as Srini describes – “for the love and affection they have for our language and our culture.”

He describes the voluntary activities, in his language, as ”swamchand seva” – an act of pure willingness and service – without anything in return. He explains:

“It is something that should not have any personal benefit attached to it. By personal benefit, I don’t mean just monetary benefits. It means working without any expectations whatsoever. We are simply trying to serve the community.”

ISLAMIC VOLUNTEERING AS SA-DA-QA, OR TA-TAWU-A: CHARITY AND BEARING WITNESS TO TRUTH

Muhammad*, an Arab-Australian Imam at a Mosque in Canberra, is – in the first instance – reluctant to designate himself as a 'volunteer' worthy of an interview. Instead, he points to examples of Muslim individuals working within registered not-for-profit organisations. He is also reluctant to speak of his own engagements in what may come across as an act of self-aggrandisement. However, when he is asked to speak about the concept of volunteering from the Islamic perspective and the way it plays out within the setting of a mosque, his reluctance gives way to immediate enthusiasm. He speaks at length, encouraging further questions and clarifications as required.

To begin with, he explains the voluntary structure in the mosque through the governing body, otherwise known as the 'shura':

> **"The main reference point for a believing Muslim is their faith, and any work in the mosque is guided by the faith. Those who run the affairs of the Masjid (mosque), the people who contribute, as well as the Imam (the leader of prayers) – they are all volunteers. They don't, as such, get paid for their work. Now, with the Imam, there is some difference as he is employed by, elected by, and looked after by the community (through their monetary contributions) in his function of leading the prayers. But even the Imam does extra-hours [beyond this function] on a voluntary basis. An Imam may get phone calls at home for consultation, for advice, for counselling in matters of faith. The extra-voluntary work is done without keeping a record of whom it is done or for how many hours – because it is all done for the sake of the Creator, and for the pleasure of the Creator.**

> **There are elected members of the governing body [the shura] in a structure similar to other organisations – there is a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer. These are all voluntary positions – they consult with each other regarding the affairs of the mosque – like, for instance, the activities that are to be organised, educational camps for children, programs during Eid, arranging donations or sponsorships from Muslim embassies for iftar (breaking of the fast) in Ramadan. Sometimes, community members may approach the body for financial or material support. If, for instance, there is a refugee family in need. The money does not come from the mosque, but the shura can raise donations and circulate a call to help."**

The premise of voluntary engagement, he explains, is to work for the pleasure of God and to hold expectations of reward from God alone – instead of human beings. He describes this as the essence of Islamic volunteering – regardless of culture or ethnic or linguistic diversity. For linguistic nuance, however, he explains the approximate word for volunteering in Arabic as follows:

> **"In Arabic, volunteering is called al-tata-wu-a. But it is closely linked to the concept of charity work in Islam. So, Muslims would be engaged in al-tata-wu-a, but at the same time, they would know – at the back of their minds – that they are not doing this work to gain rewards in this world, but in the Hereafter. Now the concept of charity, Sa-da-qa, which is also associated with volunteering (al-ta-ta-wu-a) has a root word in Arabic: S-D-Q – this means truth or bearing witness to truth. So, both volunteering as well as charity are forms of bearing witness to the Truth."**

VOLUNTEERS AS GOD'S WORKFORCE

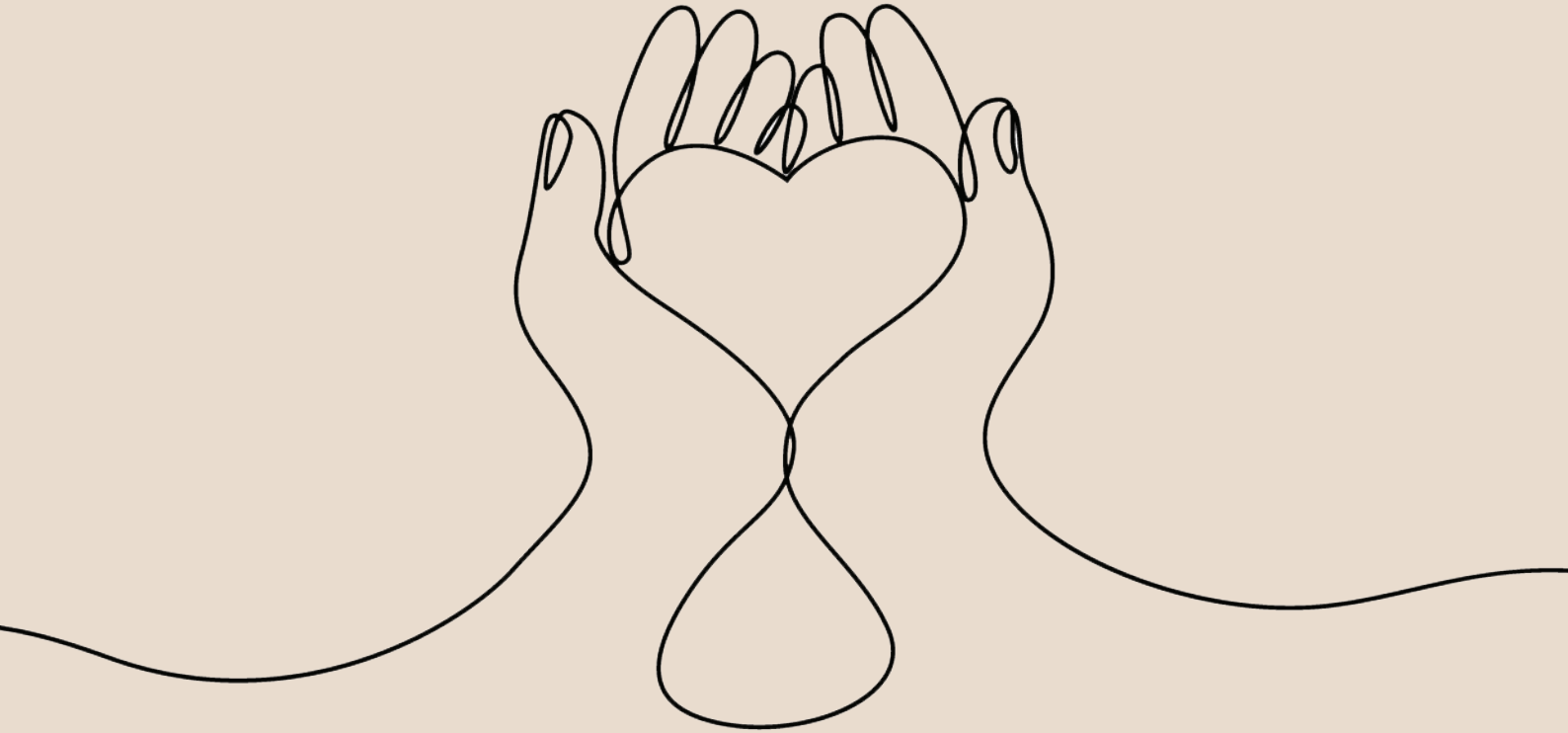
Samuel*, a Nigerian student and a newly arrived migrant, is keen to talk about his involvement with his all-Black Pentecostal Church in the Australian Capital Territory but is unsure whether he has any 'voluntary' experience to share. Growing up in Nigeria, pursuing his higher education in China, and then moving to Australia, Samuel has found what he calls the international 'fellowship' of Deeper Life Pentecostal Church a consistent part of his life's journey. While he has not found any cultural association in the ACT to enable his connection with newly emerging African communities, the 'fellowship' of Deeper Life in Canberra – comprised of ten to twelve Nigerian families – has allowed him to not only stay grounded with his faith, but also his cultural and linguistic community. He describes, for instance, how a member of the 'fellowship' – a Nigerian family that settled in Canberra several years ago – welcomed him into their house, providing him with interim accommodation at a time when the crisis of the COVI pandemic had exacerbated an already difficult task of finding the right home in the city.

Over the course of the conversation, it becomes evident that Samuel has been a core part of what he calls the 'workforce' of the Pentecostal Church. He describes the 'workforce' as being comprised of dedicated individuals, each with a role and function to fulfil – to lead the choir; to provide transportation; to perform undertake audits; to administer and manage fundraising and other external engagements. In order to participate in the 'fellowship' and the 'workforce', he explains that you simply need to express your interest to the priest. No requirement other than your willingness; no training except for a short refresher on Biblical precepts.

When asked whether they are paid roles, he responds in surprise: "They are entirely unpaid! It is work for God." It emerges, then, that they do not use the word 'volunteer,' even though their activities entail "time freely given for the larger community."

On occasion, he explains that they may organise larger events that require greater outreach. In these cases, they may solicit the engagement of more members. He continues:

> **“Yes, we may call the occasional members as volunteers. They may work ad hoc or engage on a one-time basis. But as far our own work is concerned: we don’t use the word ‘volunteer’ for it even though it is completely voluntary. That is because you ‘work’ for God. You don’t ‘volunteer’ for Him.”**



‘Why Volunteer?’ – Insights on Cultural Nuances of (Informal) Volunteering

Several research studies have noted the role of cultural factors in valuations of social responsibility, as well as the commonalities between First Nations People and other cultural and faith-based communities in their attitudes towards volunteering (Kerr, Savelsberg, Sparrow, & Tedmason, 2001). The findings of The Story Project also suggest that people from culturally diverse backgrounds often have alternative conceptualisations of volunteering. These alternative conceptualisations are predominantly found among individuals who engage in faith-based settings (mosques, churches, gurdwaras) as well as in cultural associations. For Manjula, for instance, volunteering is an act of love as practiced in the church and thereafter applied in settings beyond the church. For Srini, it is ‘pure service’ without expectation of personal benefit. For Muhammad*, an act of pleasing the Creator and bearing witness to Truth. For Samuel*, it is ‘working’ for God. Voluntary activities may be pursued as an obligation to serve one’s community by ensuring cultural preservation through language, rituals, and festivals; or alternatively, practices of volunteering may emerge from a deeply personal need to ensure familial legacy or to pursue spiritual development.

Furthermore, these activities are primarily value driven, emerging organically as a way of being and living, rather than as a pre-meditated decision viewed in instrumental terms. Informed by cultural perceptions of ‘duty’ (either towards God or towards people), they also have an ‘unbounded’ quality, which is uncircumscribed by time. It is in this context that one may place Samuel’s insistence that you ‘work’ for God rather than ‘volunteer’ for Him (as a one-time affair), or Muhammad’s assertion that an Imam did not ‘keep a record of hours worked.’ As evident in Samuel’s case, the term ‘volunteer’ in faith-based context may connote individualistic notions of time *offered* for the sake of another (in this case, for God), and the deliberate use of alternative terms by participants can suggest a conceptual difference, signaling collective notions

of religious duty and obligation. While many participants, thus, pursued volunteering in faith-based settings as religious duty, other participants of The Story Project also gravitated towards voluntary activities out of a need for cultural familiarity and a desire to discover one's identity.

> The latter instance is exemplified in the story of Fatima, a Muslim university student from a multicultural background, who began volunteering as a tutor of Arabic and Islamic Studies from a young age. Born to parents of Indian origin, Fatima had spent her early childhood between Saudi Arabia and Australia before her family finally relocated to Australia permanently. The transition from life in a Muslim country to Australia, where she was now a minority, was an eye opener for her. In her Catholic school, she often stood out for the way she dressed or the social restrictions that she observed, but her multicultural upbringing had given her a distinct appreciation of diversity. "I loved listening to different people's accents," she said, "and situating their life stories."
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> Her shift back to Australia soon set her on a pursuit to rediscover her identity and her religious heritage. In what became her second homecoming in Australia, she describes how the mosque came to serve a focal point of social connections for her family. From participating in the activities of the mosque and its weekend classes, Fatima – still a teenager – began to volunteer as a tutor. It came almost naturally to her. "I just loved to teach, and I – unlike other students – had a fluency in Arabic." Over the course of her engagements at the mosque, she established a special bond with an Islamic teacher who had set up a Sunday school in her private garage. This connection paved the way for more voluntary tutoring every Sunday at a makeshift school outside the mosque.

> Fatima describes how her voluntary pursuits were driven by a desire to gain deeper knowledge about her faith:
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> **"I was really into the idea of being a Muslim representative – and you know, doing public relations and public diplomacy. I wanted to learn more about Islamic history so I could adequately represent it. But a lot of Muslims in the community did not have knowledge of basic concepts; how could you represent yourself to others and defend your faith without that? So [in our classes], we tried to give people the knowledge of basic concepts so they could feel more comfortable in their skin, as Muslims."**

Much like faith-based networks, cultural associations also served as sites where volunteers gravitated to preserve their identity. Within cultural associations, volunteering could also be linked to a higher goal of serving the community. Telugu language teacher, Srini, for instance, described it as an act of "swamchand seva" or pure service.

For other participants of The Story Project, engagements within cultural associations also stemmed from a need to provide resources to newly arrived migrants and to support them in their settlement journey. Cultural associations were often crucial in settlement journeys of new migrants. They provided social capital to enable new migrants to find interim accommodation and navigate the difficulties of finding housing, especially in instances when rental agents sought employment records, credit history, and financial stability from their tenants.

Furthermore, cultural associations also provided informal connections to access employment opportunities and opportunities for (English) language practice. Finally, these associations allowed emerging and established communities in Australia to maintain their cultural rituals, and therefore, their identity, even as they provided material assistance for their integration. In the interviews for The Story Project, many

volunteers working within cultural associations felt a strong sense of obligation to 'pay it forward' by helping newly arrived migrants, feeling compelled by their own early experiences of adjusting (socially, economically, and culturally) in a new country.

> Such was the case with Muhammad Zubair*, an Afghan migrant who arrived in Australia on a humanitarian visa in 2009. Prior to his settlement in Australia, Zubair worked as a teacher in Kabul; his entire family, in fact, worked in the education sector – his parents as principals of a boys' school and a girls' school, respectively. Due to his family's proximity with the Afghan government at the time, and their interaction with several international aid agencies, they became targets of the insurgent Taliban. "Sometimes we would use one route to work in one car and come back by another route using a different car." Then in 2019, Zubair received an opportunity to migrate to Australia through a UNHCR funded scheme. He was the first in his immediate family, before the others followed suit.
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> Zubair describes his initial sense of disorientation after moving to a new country:
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> **"When I came to Australia, there were a lot of challenges for me, because this country was very new – the language, the culture, the traffic rules, the food. Where is the halal market? Where is the mosque? I used to wonder. There was no one here from my family to support me in that situation at that time. Then after 14 months of this [disorientation], I started doing voluntary work with different organisations, and learnt a lot in the process."**
>
> Zubair began his volunteering journey through mainstream organisations, such as Relationships Australia, Refugee Council, and the Migrant Resource Centre, in the hope of gaining employable skills. But soon, he felt the need to make his own independent initiative to cater

to refugee families arriving from Afghanistan. His 'formal' volunteering with these organisations soon began to blend into informal volunteering outside working hours, as he went over and beyond to cater to the newly arrived families:

"I became known as this go-to person for help. People would reach out to me if they were in need; or if they knew anyone who was arriving in Australia, they would connect them with me." Remembering his own challenges of adjusting to a new environment, Zubair decided to set up a Pashtun Association of South Australia. "I said to my brother [when he arrived]. We need to create an organisation and help build the Pashtun community here."

He recalls how his manager at Relationships Australia – where he engaged as a formal volunteer – assisted him with establishing an IP address and a constitution for the Pashtun Association. Although the Association did not have a physical office space, and was run informally by a few committed members, setting up a website allowed the Association to gain visibility and for the members to seek grant funds. Working within the umbrella of the Pashtun Association, Zubair now also organises multicultural cricket tournaments from time to time:

"Each registered team pays around $25 that we use for renting the cricket grounds and other facilities. We do this purely for our young generation. They love cricket and need the opportunity to play, to improve [in the sport], and to interact with other Australians in a friendly setting. It is purely for their wellbeing."

‘Volunteering without Material Gain’ – Informal Volunteering and the Question of Employability

Whereas formal volunteering is often pursued as a pathway to employment, the findings of The Story Project highlighted that informal volunteering within cultural and faith-based networks often has an ambivalent relationship with the question of employability. This ambivalence is often a feature of the way in which the voluntary activities are understood by the participants (as ‘pure service’) rather than (an absence of) skill set inherent in these activities.

This is particularly exemplified in the interviews with Zubair and his uncle, Saifi, with whom he is seated. For both, finding employment in Australia was an uphill struggle. It is not as if they did not have prior work experience or degrees with sufficient transferrable skills, they insist. While Zubair had previously worked as a school teacher and offered many translation and interpretation services to international organisations in Afghanistan, his uncle, Saifi, has a post-graduate qualification in agricultural studies from overseas. Arriving in Australia, however, the stumbling block for them was the often-unspoken requirement of local experience solicited by the Australian job market. “When I went to the US, I was surprised to see my Afghan community there and how well they were doing. But here in Australia, if you don’t have local [job] experience, then you don’t get a chance [in the job market]. It is very difficult,” he said, shaking his head.

For both nephew and uncle, voluntary engagements with local and international not-for-profit organisations in Australia have stemmed from the need to become more employable. Saifi, in particular, described offering voluntary translation and interpretation services to many organisations, with considerable time spent commuting from one organisation to another. His voluntary activities were driven by the urgency of finding a job at a time when his unemployment was exacerbated by a medical emergency in his family. While he considered his voluntary experiences with

not-for-profit organisations with gratitude, these engagements were nonetheless fraught – tied with the compulsion of becoming financially stable and providing for his family in the interim period.

In contrast to their experiences of formal volunteering, however, both Zubair and Saifi spoke of their informal volunteering with the Pashtun Association and Pashtun Literary Clubs in a completely different register. Here, their engagements were not tied to a sense of compulsion; they are not taken as a means to an end; but as an end in and of itself – as an act of service for their community. In a similar manner, other participants of The Story Project also distinguished their activities of informal volunteering from their engagements as 'formal' volunteers in mainstream organisations. For Viv, a Colombian migrant and a single parent, there was a clear difference between 'volunteering for work' and 'volunteering as an act of service.' She found the former concept as 'foreign' and uniquely Australian: "When I came to Australia, it was the first time I heard this idea: if you want to find work, then volunteer. If you want to make friends, then volunteer." She described this notion to be different from her own understanding which was informed by the practice of Catholicism in her home country, Colombia. Whereas she perceived some notions of volunteering in Australia to be better categorised as professionalised internships, she believed that the essence of volunteering, as practiced by her family in Colombia, was serving the underprivileged and those in need.

Srini, who provides Telugu language classes for the community, described his activities as an act of "swamchand seva" – pure service and willingness. "This means," he explained further, "working without expectations of personal benefit. By personal benefit, I don't just mean monetary benefit, but having no personal gain out of this *whatsoever*." As he elaborated further, it became evident that he meant disengagement with the concept of material gain. When questioned whether he viewed his voluntary engagements as a potential pathway to employment, he laughed. "Not at all. We are all very well established financially. We do this as a pure act of service. Any connection with employability would be purely coincidental.'

Unlike formal engagements with volunteer involving organisations, therefore, voluntary activities that were taken up informally as an extension of cultural and religious service had a more ambivalent relationship with the question of employment. In large part, this ambivalence stemmed from the way the activities are perceived by their participants. In this sense, it was related more with the underlying ethos driving their engagements rather than a lack of recognition of critical, transferrable skills inherent in these activities. For instance, in the case of Samuel who characterised his activities with the Pentecostal Church as 'working' rather than 'volunteering' for God, the question of employability in relation to his activities elicited a similar response to that of Srini. Shaking his head vigorously, he exclaimed how he would not even view his work from the lens of employability, and how it would be contrary to the principles with which they engage. As an afterthought, however, he acknowledged the numerous organisational and administrative skills he has learnt through his voluntary engagements at the Church. "But even if I wanted to put these activities down on my resume, I would not do so," he said. "You simply do not know how the employer would judge your faith-based engagements, and whether that would affect your chances of being employed." As Samuel's story highlights, then, a combination of internal as well as external inhibitions may affect one's valuation of informal voluntary work as a pathway to employment – particularly when these activities are culturally or religiously inflected.

While some participants of The Story Project, like Srini and Samuel, were averse to the notion of judging their voluntary work in terms of employability, others acknowledged their engagements to carry 'coincidental benefits.' 23-year-old Fatima, who volunteered as a tutor of Arabic and Islamic Studies, appreciated the valuable interpersonal, public speaking, and tutoring skills that she acquired over the course of her voluntary engagements. In hindsight, she reflected on how her engagements made her a confident person to enter the job market. Manjula, who had served as a former President of the Telegu Association and now runs a community produce garden in Canberra, also acknowledged how her voluntary engagements,

coincidentally, ended up impressing her employers. After moving to Australia, Manjula not only had long gaps in her employment history, but also switched careers. After being called for a job interview, Manjula described how the subject of her volunteering experiences almost came as an afterthought, when she was questioned on her 'hobbies' in her spare time. The interviewer was impressed with her informal voluntary engagements, especially with her time management skills. In retrospect, Manju surmised that she would not have spoken about her engagements had they been framed in terms of skills, rather than interests, hobbies, and other activities. Her reflections, thereafter, led to a discussion on what employers may do to acknowledge and appreciate skillsets inherent in activities falling outside of formal volunteering and paid jobs.

In summation, volunteering was primarily viewed as an altruistic act by the participants, but it, nevertheless, carried 'coincidental benefits'. This positive valuation of volunteering and its coincidental benefits, then, leads us to the important question of recognition. What does it mean, in other words, to recognise the value of the informal voluntary domain on the terms of the participants?

Informal Volunteering and the Question of Recognition

Just as attitudes towards the relation of volunteering with employability were varied, the question of recognition for voluntary work was also contested, ranging from ambivalence and dismissal to, in some cases, outright opposition. This was evident in the responses of the participants as well as in the meta data of the interviews – in people's reluctance to be named, to be acknowledged as a 'volunteer,' and, in some cases, to even speak about individual accomplishments. However, whilst many of the participants of The Story Project did not express interest in the idea of individual recognition for their voluntary work, there was considerable enthusiasm when it came to platforming collective cultural practices, rituals, and religious concepts that underpinned the basis of their voluntary work. Therefore, the form of recognition solicited by the volunteers was often collective, rather than individual.

> To illustrate, we turn to the story of Diana Abdel-Rahman, a Lebanese Australian, who is a dedicated volunteer, a community activist, a founding member of the Canberra Multicultural Community Forum, and the founder of the Australian Muslim Voice Radio. While she has received many awards and accolades in recognition of her work, she says**,** "If ever a day came about that I feel I am doing this because I want to get in the media or front page, then I am there for the wrong reasons."
>
> Although her engagements are largely secular, outside settings of worship, her response reflects a similar sentiment echoed by those volunteering within the mosque. As Mustapha*, an Imam of a mosque puts it:
>
> **"In Islam, the idea of seeking recognition for your voluntary and philanthropic engagements is described as 'ri'yaa' – which translates into showing off or ostentation. It is also seen as a form of satisfying the ego (the nafs)."**

If you helped a thousand people in your city or donated a $100,000 for this great volunteering project, and you need to have your name mentioned, then this attitude is looked down upon. You work to please the Creator – not to satisfy your nafs (ego/self).

Returning to Diana, when she is asked what drives her in her commitments, she narrates a tale that she has mentioned several times in her interviews. To this day, the parable holds a great deal of force for her:

"I remember reading a story from an Islamic perspective when I was young, and the story goes like this: once upon a time, there was a city where there is a lot of debauchery and awful corruption at all levels. But there was this one man who was very devout. He stayed in his room all day, praying. Then God decrees to destroy the city, but the angels say, "You can't destroy the city. There's this one man who's devout, he prays every day in his room and he's a good man." And then God says, "Destroy him first."

The meaning of the story is that you could be a good person, you could pray every day and do good. But if you are not out into your surrounding and trying to make a change there, and you are not trying to spread something good, then you are of no value if you are keeping to yourself only."

Today, her work is not only informed by a deep commitment to help newly arrived migrants to settle in Australia, particularly those on humanitarian visas from zones of conflict, but also to raise awareness about political crises around the world – from Syria and Palestine to Afghanistan and Bosnia. "Connecting with the life stories of the families who settle in Australia has also made me relate with different conflicts

on a very personal and visceral level. They are no longer just 'things' happening out there, externally; these are issues affecting the lives of people you know and continue to affect their lives through their families and friends overseas."

The essence of her community engagement, then, is not only to help incoming families materially, but also to raise awareness of the political crises that affected them in their countries of origin and issues of concern in their country of settlement (Australia). In addition to her work on anti-discrimination in Australia, Diana devotes the month of Ramadan each year to voluntarily run the Australian Muslim Voice Radio, inviting Muslim individuals and families to contribute their insights and their content. Here, also, her engagement stems from a need to represent the Muslim community in their language and on their terms. She recalls:

"My father used to tell all the new arrivals to Australia that there were three things you didn't talk about in Australia: you didn't ever discuss how much money you earned; you never talked about who you voted for; and, you never talked about religion.

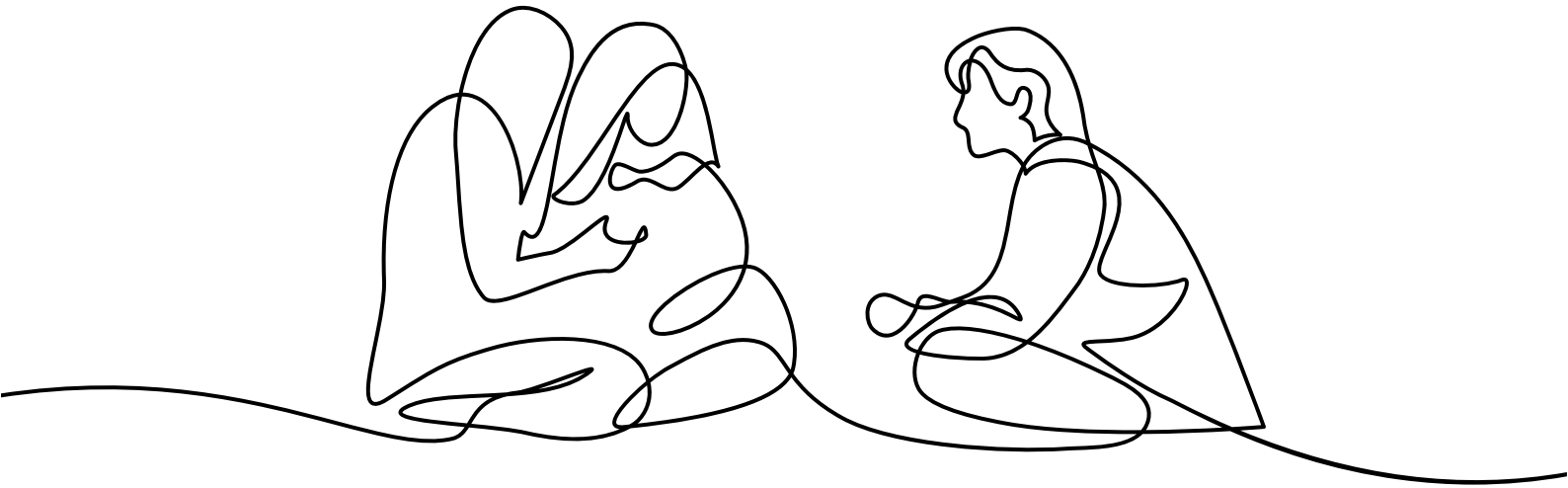
The adage of not talking about religion changed as Australia changed. I soon realised that as Australian Muslims, we were always in a defensive position and made to be defensive as a result of events overseas. If somebody behaves in a manner that is not acceptable overseas or even in Australia, I am not responsible for it. As Australians we are just like you, going about our daily lives, living normally. With my work, I am trying to change the dialogue. From defending to representing."

As The Story Project illustrates, the nature of collective recognition solicited by volunteers for their community engagement was often intrinsically connected with their primary motivations for volunteering. For instance, Sikh volunteers providing free meals in the Gurdwara or running food vans during emergencies often sought to represent the principles of Sikhism to the wider community, rather than showcase their individual engagements as volunteers. Similarly, those volunteering formally with refugee families and new migrants often ended up establishing deeper convivial relations with the community. The net effect of this transition from formal volunteering to personal friendship was a shift in emphasis for the involved actors – a movement from offering privatised, material assistance to refugee families towards establishing platforms that could represent and raise the collective concerns of that community. Such was the case with Zubair, an Australian-Afghan volunteer who transitioned from volunteering with newly arrived Afghan families to establishing a forum for collective representation. Such was also the case with Diana, for whom helping families settle down in Australia meant raising awareness of their concerns and larger socio-political crises that their lives were embedded in.

Furthermore, collective recognition of voluntary engagements, as sought by the participants of The Story Project, was predicated on ideational recognition as well as material recognition. Ideational recognition entailed an acknowledgement of one's cultural identity, socio-political concerns, or the faith-based principles (whether Sikh or Islamic) underpinning the situated engagements of the volunteers. On the other hand, material recognition of voluntary activities related to the larger question of providing an enabling environment to support the existence of these activities. In this regard, the need for the provision of physical space emerged several times in the interviews. When volunteers sought to showcase their identity through their rituals, they did not find enough venues of the right size or function for their activities. Many volunteers working with and through cultural associations related their struggle of finding the right venue to host their events, the expense of hiring facilities, and unsuitability of public parks for weather-related and other logistical reasons. On

occasion, some described how religious organisations, such as churches, had come to the rescue, offering their premises to members of another religious community to hold a service in time of need. On other occasions, participants of The Story Project described using public school venues to host their activities. As Srini put it:

> **"There are fees everywhere; for school venues, for the Gungahlin College theatre. Even if there is a hall of the right size [for our cultural events], it is way too expensive for an association to bear the costs. Nothing is free. Only we, human beings, are free.**
>
> **Different states have different arrangements for hiring public schools (as venues) – some offer for free while others don't. We need free access to premises – this way we won't have to charge money from the members for additional ancillary costs. This way our voluntary activities can be truly free."**



PART III: BUILDING 'COMMUNITY' THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

What was the 'value' of volunteering? Stories

NAVIGATING THE GREAT 'UNKNOWN'

Before Izabela arrived in Australia from Slovakia, she travelled and worked as an air hostess. Settling in Australia with her one-year-old son was not so much an adjustment in cultural terms given her fluency in English. But she still describes it as the great "unknown" in terms of accessing different services, such as Centrelink, or navigating the healthcare system for her family and her son. "It was a new country, a new home. I didn't know anyone apart from my partner, not a single soul. And so of course, that was a worry. I didn't know anything – what is the system here, who is the best doctor for my son, what services are we eligible for?"

One day, out on a walk in a park with her son, Izabela coincidentally came across a poster for a playgroup. "To be honest," she says, "that saved me in Australia. It was like a door opening for me, to connect with the community, with people, with everything really."

For the next two years, Izabella was an avid member of the playgroup in which mothers from the local neighborhood would pay a minimal fee of $20 per meeting – with the subsequent proceeds being used to cover the expenses of arts and crafts, snacks, and supplies. Thus, when she found that the leader of the local playgroup was travelling interstate, Izabella felt compelled to keep the playgroup running. "It was simply too valuable a resource to lose – a wealth of a resource." Izabella, then, stepped up as

a lead volunteer for the group for the remaining six months, coordinating with several community departments such as fire rescue or the police to offer information and educational sessions for the group and for the parents and kids. The activities proceeded for several months, before coming to a halt from the COVID-19 pandemic, but Izabela is keen to re-engage with the group and re-build as a community forum that connects not only mothers and children from the neighbourhood, but also other community organisations dealing with service provision.

CONNECTING WITH A SENSE OF BEING AUSTRALIAN – THROUGH A COMMUNITY GARDEN

A single parent, Viv* moved to Australia from Colombia for a post-graduate qualification, bringing with her a wealth of previous experience working with the Ministry of Environment in her home country as well as several consultations with the World Bank and other development agencies. In addition to her professional work, Viv also volunteered in her home country with a centre for underprivileged elderly people. "Back in Colombia, we don't have the concept of aged care facilities like we do here in Australia. Families and relatives will care for their elderly folks until the very end. Only those who have no living or surviving relatives or those who are very poor live in centres for underprivileged old people." In this centre, run by a Catholic Church from her neighbourhood, Viv describes how volunteering, for her, was like a family affair. Growing up as a child, her family would prepare regular meals and then dine with the elderly community at the centre. Their volunteering was strongly informed by the Catholic Christian principle of 'caritas' – charity.

Moving to Australia, Viv found herself encountering a concept of volunteering that was new to her. "When I moved to Australia, it was the first time I heard this idea: if you want to find a job, then volunteer. If you want to find friends, then volunteer," she says. Given her previous professional expertise and her interactions within the post-graduate student community in Victoria, Viv did not feel the need to find either friends or jobs through volunteering. However, she did feel the need to connect with a sense of being Australian and volunteering soon became her avenue of doing so.

Viv describes being fascinated with the culture of community gardens in Australia. "Back in Colombia, having community or kitchen gardens was only something grandmothers did occasionally – or farmers. But here it was a culture, with gardening shows on TV and the radio." Viv eventually began volunteering at a church garden. It became her pathway of connecting with a new place through a cultivation of land and garden – and eventually, also finding some new Australian friends along the way.

CONNECTING WITH A SENSE OF BEING AUSTRALIAN: THROUGH A MAKESHIFT PRAYER SPACE (MUSALLAH)

Tarek – an Egyptian Australian – grew up interacting within his own community of Arab Australians in Sydney from a very young age. He would frequent social gatherings organised by the Arab-Australian community in Sydney, in which a few families would get together, hire a hall, and host dinners. During the month of Ramadan, these gatherings would increase to every evening for thirty days, with families chipping in to organise the breaking of the fast, as well as communal prayers:

"We grew up around a lot of Arab Australians – Egyptian families, in particular. My mother emphasised this from the very beginning – that we, in many ways, were different from the rest of Australians. It is like Australians were going in one direction, and we were in another. We had different restrictions – dietary, social."

As someone with an introverted and shy demeanour, Tarek's social circle in his Catholic school was also limited. He describes himself as someone who not always religiously observant, but who only began to practise more devoutly after his university years. When he would chance a visit to mosques on Fridays in Lakemba or Auburn, he would find it alienating that the Imams delivered sermons in their respective languages – Turkish, Arabic, Dari. It is only when he shifted houses to Baukham Hills that he found a few 'brothers,' including a Turkish colleague from work, who had set up a makeshift place for prayer in the Hills District of Sydney and he became involved as a volunteer. The difference was that this was a multicultural community – with sermons delivered in English.

"So, the brothers set up a Muslim Society in the district which would be accessible to the locals there for Friday afternoon prayers. And it

just grew a lot over the years because there were more professional companies in that area. A lot of workers would come to that district, and there was a greater expansion of the community. The workers brought a kind of cosmopolitanism there. This began to reflect in our prayer gatherings. The gatherings had nothing to do with ethnicity there – only religion. So, it was much better …much nicer."

His frequent prayers soon gave way to volunteering at this makeshift Musallah, which interestingly, allowed him to connect with a multicultural community in Australia, to experience different cultural cuisines, and to connect with his Australian identity by participating in activities he never did before – like bushwalking.

"I mean, normally, as I mentioned – I didn't usually mix. If we did, it was with the Egyptian families in different dinners and gatherings. But here [at the new prayer space] I met a really good brother – he was Australian Anglo-Saxon. I was very inspired by him – there was so much good in him. And then there was a Zimbabwean friend, and a Turkish friend. And from the point of view of food, there were now so many cuisines to share and try – especially at the breaking of the fast. Indian – South Asian cuisine.

I remember a South African brother who I trusted a lot – he used to go for bush walks in the Blue Mountains in Sydney. And he said, "Oh, did you want to come? I know all the tracks there." I had never done bushwalking before – except as part of some Scouts training in school. But that was not for fun. This was the first time I tried bushwalking for fun that is. I started going with him, mixing with people I wouldn't normally be with. I am now in a different area, but I still drive up to that community on Fridays and volunteer there. I feel like I need to be part of that Friday group gathering."

VOLUNTEERING AS COMMUNITY-LED PROBLEM SOLVING AND INSTITUTION BUILDING

Henry first moved to Australia in 1970 as a student of engineering, before returning to Singapore to serve in the mandatory National Service for a few years. In his second homecoming to Australia, now on a teaching fellowship at the University of New South Wales, closely followed by a job at the Electricity Commission, Henry was now a family man with a two-year old daughter. “It was a quiet and normal life we were living, with my wife and I working and taking turns during the day to care for our daughter.” Like many skilled migrants in his situation, Henry describes how the idea of ‘volunteering’ never really featured in his imagination as an activity to pursue. Rather, as he puts it, he “sort of fell into it” and was subsequently pulled in “through a combination of coincidence and a community need.”

He carries on: “It was accidental, really, how I came to participate in and lead the project. At the time in the mid-seventies, there were not really many Chinese migrants, and they were mostly scattered around Australia. One of our friends at the time floated the idea, saying, “look, we all have young families. It is very difficult to find a place in childcare centers in the first place. Let’s set up a proposal to set up a childcare center in an area close to Chinatown.” The proposal was then driven by a need to not only provide a service that was in limitation, but – along the way – it was also cater to the specific needs of the Chinese community by establishing culturally appropriate childcare centers where the children would be provided linguistic and cultural immersion. Henry describes how the original invitation to discuss the proposal was meant for his wife, but owing to her busy schedule and his own flexible work hours, he ended up stepping in and being subsequently asked by the meeting members to lead the project.

As Henry describes, this community proposal coincided with a shift in Australia’s multicultural policy in the mid-1970s, wherein ethno-specific service provision was outsourced to non-English speaking communities. The policy had followed the

Galbally report, *Review of Post-Arrival Program and Services for Migrants*, that argued for immigrant settlement to be based on self-help, run by Ethno-specific Agencies and subsidised by the State.[47] Despite this overt shift in Australia's multicultural policy, Henry describes his struggle as the 'lead volunteer' to oversee the implementation of the community proposal. Navigating the system to decipher the rules and processes of application was not easy. Nor was there adequate legibility of the kind of programs that had already been undertaken by different groups to either emulate the model or identify a gap in service provision.

For Henry, the term 'volunteering' is a very specific concept in the English language, which does not have exact translation in the Chinese culture or language. However, he describes the closest parallel concept to be 'Yi-Wu' – which conveys the idea of people coming together to solve issues or do something free of charge for the benefit of a group or a section of the people in the community. He narrates his own experience as a leader of this community proposal as an example of 'volunteering' or 'Yi-Wu.' In the initial phases of implementing the community-led proposal, Henry describes devoting several hours to "building relationships with the government department [Department of Childcare] in order to put forward the proposal," researching the requirements of its implementation, and organising "meetings after meetings" to lead the project. As a result, the committee decided to register as a legal entity (as a co-operative facility), which required a constitution and a registered address. Despite the registration, however, the organisation worked primarily through volunteers:

> **"We were all volunteers – we all took part in it as volunteers. There was no funding, no resources. After registration, of course, you officially have an organisation, but nothing else. You have no service, no money. When we submitted our submission, we waited for a year, and we were finally informed that it was well written, but we wouldn't be funded.**

When the committee's initial plan to set up a community specific childcare centre failed, the committee members then brainstormed Plan B. They discovered the

presence of 'family daycares' registered at private homes and – taking in collective feedback from the Chinese community members in Greater Sydney – they decided to serve as a community liaison to connect Chinese families (potential clients) with culturally appropriate family daycare facilities. Plan B turned out to be an instant success, with services all free of cost, so much so that the Office of Childcare came to know about it. "The Office of Childcare was very impressed," Henry recalls, "because we did it on a totally voluntary basis without any financial support from the government."

As a result of their success, the committee was able to receive funding from the government to continue their services, which allowed them to hire one paid staff member while others continued to work on a voluntary basis. The success story also allowed the committee to return to their original proposal of setting up a culturally appropriate daycare center. Whilst the organisation received some funding for this proposal, they were still short of funds to both establish and run the enterprise. Once again, the presence of a need and a collective drive to establish institutions for the community, led to several instances of informal volunteering. Henry describes how his core committee members 'volunteered' to offer their personal assets as 'security deposits' to sustain the enterprise and set up garage sales to raise funds; how individuals from the larger Chinese community, outside of the core committee, began to step in, conducting repair works at the newly purchased childcare facility or offering to prepare meals.

> **"They [the latter] were not the core group of volunteers from the committee. They were just people from the larger community when we publicised the idea. Not necessarily potential clients either. They just came, worked ad hoc, helped administratively – but we did put them on a roster. They were mostly introduced by friends and friends of friends. We engaged with them based on trust."**

FROM VOLUNTEERING 'FORMALLY' TO DEVELOPING LASTING FRIENDSHIPS

Sophie is a second generation Australian, born in Australia to an Iranian father and a Malaysian mother with English as her main language of communication. "I am very much Australian, but my household was a bit different. I mean we eat rice for breakfast, lunch, and dinner," she says laughingly.

As a student of business and tourism, Sophie spent considerable time travelling, touring overseas, and living in informal settlements and townships in South Africa. There, she engaged with young entrepreneurs, street artists, teachers, and musicians. Her experiences overseas were her first grounded confrontation with global structural equalities. Little did she know that upon return to Australia in 2020, she would find herself face-to-face with the widening – and previously invisibilised – socio-economic fissures now laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic:

"The pandemic, I think for everybody just really exposed the inequality in people's lives. It was a real privilege that there were people who could isolate properly after getting sick. This wasn't the case in many parts of South Africa, but also here in Australia. To isolate was not an option for everyone. Seeing it here in Australia as well, it really smacked me in the face. And I thought, I really need to do something. And Black Lives Matter was also, I think, happening at the same time. I also had an affinity with African communities based on my experiences abroad. And so, it just really motivated me to look for places to volunteer and help."

This realisation led to her formal volunteer work with an organisation that catered to youth from refugee families in Brisbane, most of whom hailed

from Tanzania and Sudan. As part of her formal volunteer work with the organisation, Sophie was tasked with driving the youth to sporting clubs and designating time for English language lessons. Sophie describes how her engagements "kicked off her informal volunteering." She particularly connected with one family with ten children, whom she began to visit every Sunday beyond the requirements of the volunteer organisation, to drive them to recreational activities, and to connect over family dinners with more informal occasions for English language practice.

"For the formal volunteer work, I was screened and interviewed, and went through a proper induction process. Initially, I was a bit concerned – I did not want to be inappropriate by going above and beyond as I worked within a formal structure. Was I allowed to go into their house and spend time with them? Was I allowed to relate to their family? Being part of the formal organisation helped develop the initial trust. And as we began to connect more deeply, those questions eased. They embraced me as family, and I remained connected through them even though I stopped volunteering for the organisation. Even now, we are in different cities, but we connect through zoom from time to time."

The Value of Volunteering: Insights on Community Building

The dominant literature on volunteering examines its social value through the lens of social cohesion, which, in turn, has been described through various signifiers such as resilience, increased social capital, social integration, and interdependence.[48] The concept of social cohesion features as a fundamental one in academic as well as policy-related inquiries to signal consensus in society as well as mechanisms to mitigate conflict. In the Scanlon Foundations series of Social Cohesion Surveys conducted between 2007 and 2021, the term has been further operationalised through the components of the Scanlon-Monash Index. These include: 1) sense of belonging: an indication of pride in the Australian way of life and culture; 2) a sense of worth, conveyed through satisfaction with financial and emotional status; 3) measurement of acceptance or rejection in society, through experiences of racism, discrimination, or social and government support for the maintenance of customs and traditions; 5) the rate of political participation, through voting or activism; and, 6) views on social inclusion and justice, including income gaps and inequalities, the adequacy of financial support for low income population, and trust in the Australian government.[49]

Through the prism of the Scanlon-Monash index, the findings of The Story Project suggest that, by far, the important value of informal volunteering lay in the establishment of a sense of belonging to a place and land. In fact, volunteering within cultural and faith-based networks emerged as a nodal point through which a sense of belonging and community was constituted. Even where evidence of vertical ties with the government (through a level of trust in their policies) remained imprecise, volunteering contributed to a sense of belonging with Australia by enabling the establishment of horizontal ties with different groups. Furthermore, even where notions of 'community' were specific (if not essentialist), the establishment of these horizontal ties enabled emerging and established communities to forge their own

unique sense of belonging to Australia. When culturally specific forms of volunteering contributed to a better sense of belonging with Australia, 'Australian-ness' could be commensurate with the uniqueness of one's identity and difference, rather than a homogenous assimilation into an Anglo-Celtic mainstream.

In the story of Tarek, for instance, volunteering in the religiously specific context of the Musallah (makeshift mosque) in Sydney actually paved the way for greater friendships and connections beyond the Muslim community through activities such as bushwalking. It also allowed him to connect with diversity within the community of Muslims, moving beyond Arab-Australian socialisation to enjoy cuisines from South Asia, Turkey, and South Africa. Volunteering, therefore, opens doors to community interaction and allows individuals to connect across ethnic and sectarian divides. Much in the same way, for Viv, coming to Australia from Colombia had been a cultural adjustment in relation to her practice of Christianity. Whereas Catholicism had a public presence in Colombia, influencing several social activities, she found the Christian culture in Australia more privatised, and initially, unrelatable. Ultimately, it was an act of gardening and cultivation in a church garden that allowed her to meet different individuals and forge a new relationship with being Australian.

Another crucial insight from The Story Project pertains to the nature of informal volunteering as a continuum in its relation to formal volunteering. Rather than taking informal and formal volunteering as dichotomous categories, The Story Project reinforces the notion of volunteering as a 'spectrum of participation' as rendered by Woolwin and Hardhill (Fig 3).[50] This 'spectrum' is depicted through a Venn Diagram that ranges from individual acts of help to community led problem-solving, to, finally, formal volunteering. As depicted in Figure 3, formal and informal volunteering are separate categories in a spectrum with a zone of 'mixed characteristics' in between – manifesting in the form of community action and participation.

Figure 3: The 'Volunteering Spectrum' (Woolwin & Hardhill)

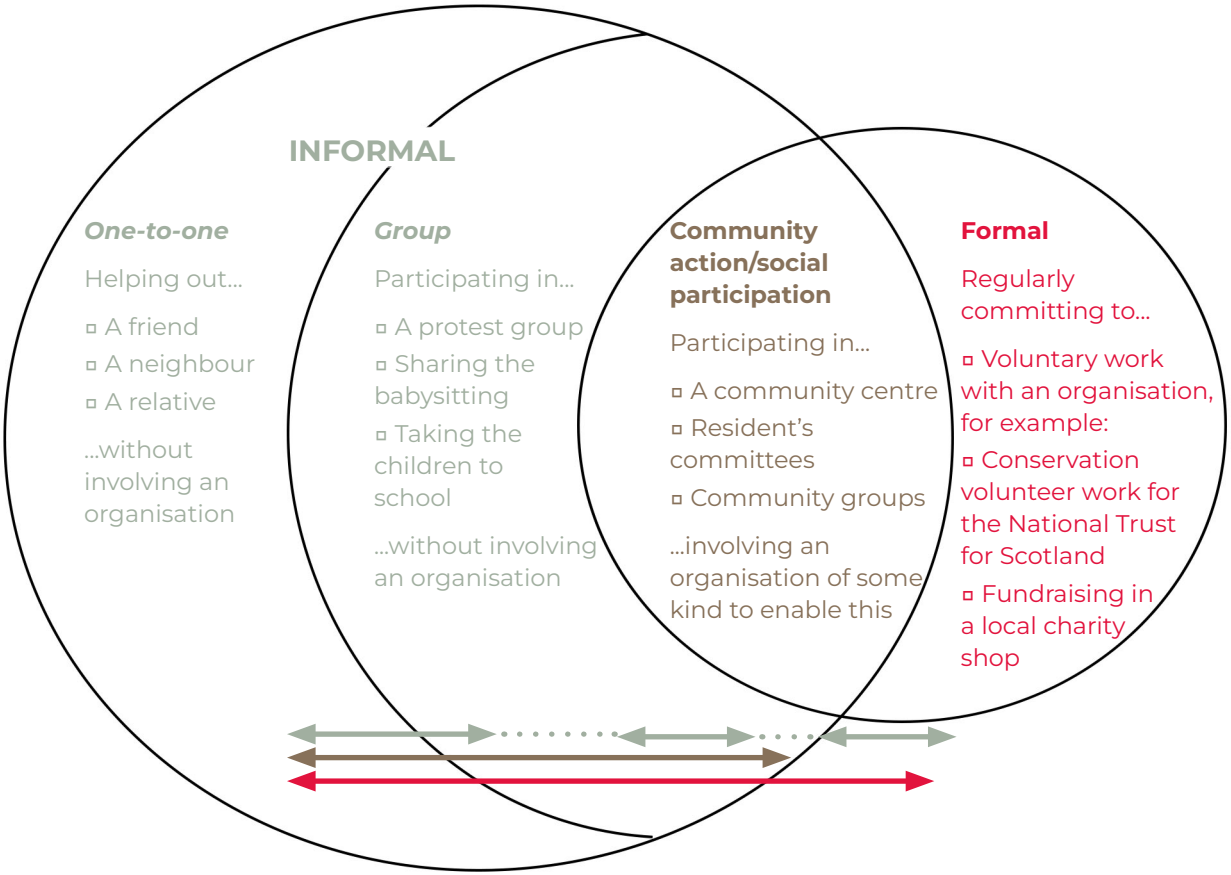
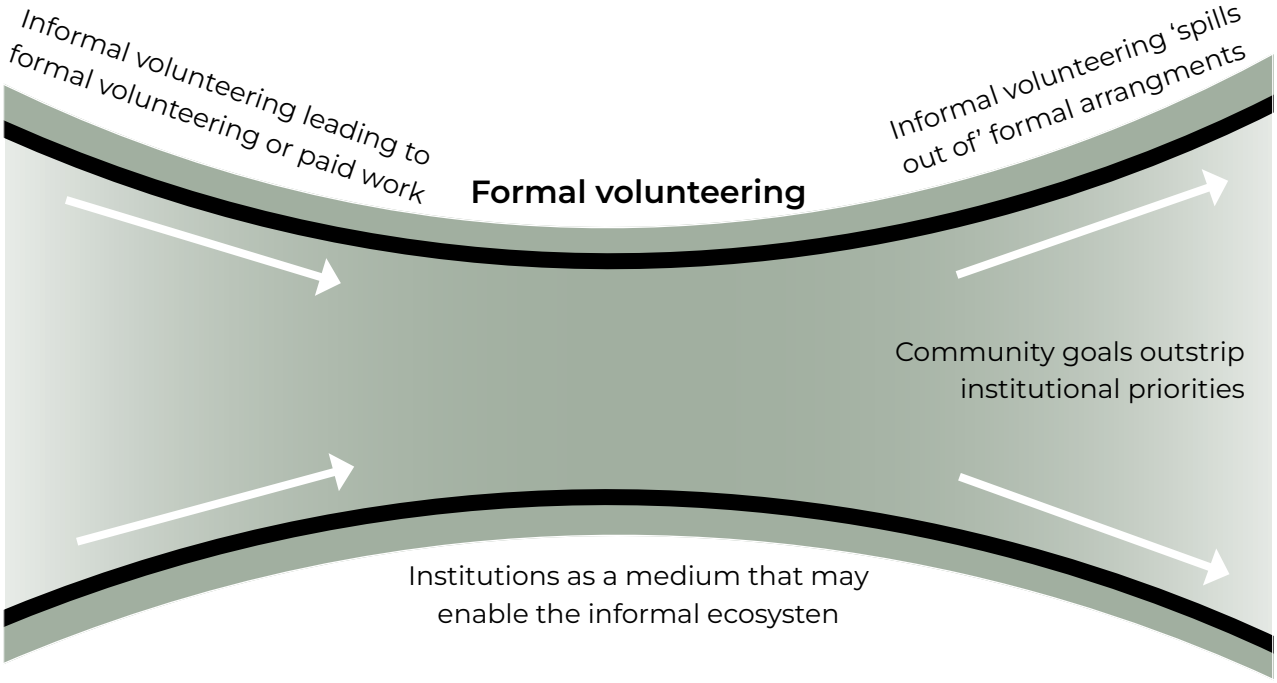


Figure 4: The Volunteering Gradient, Volunteering Australia



Building on the idea of 'a spectrum of participation,' this research then goes further to describe the relationship of informal and formal volunteering as a continuum, where informal volunteering not only leads to formal volunteering, but also 'spills out' of the other. One might then visualise the volunteering as a gradient (Figure 4) – with informal volunteering as a zone of activities that often occur prior to, or inevitably lead to, the formation of organisations and institutions to maintain longevity and sustainability. At the same time, informal volunteering also 'spills out' of formal volunteering, outstripping institutional priorities since its ultimate goal is to serve the community. On both ends of the gradient, then, informal volunteering retains an unbounded quality as depicted by divergent curves on both ends.[51]

Several stories from this project exemplify the unbounded nature of informal volunteering. Gary's initiative to cook and deliver meals during the 2020 lockdown is one such example of an initially unbounded form of informal volunteering progressively moving towards greater formalisation. Not only did it begin as an informal call on social media, it also entailed substantial investment of time and personal cost. Its informal beginnings, as Gary mentions, made it easier to initiate with less red tape involved. The downside of the informal initiative, however, was in sustaining itself financially, which required formal recognition, audit, and accountability. Similarly, other participants of The Story Project also recalled their efforts to establish the first Islamic center in Canberra, which entailed driving from Canberra to Melbourne to fundraise, and spending 18 hours for days on end to see their project to fruition. This also parallels Henry's efforts to build a culturally appropriate daycare center, which entailed not only an investment of time and money but also a willingness to take risks to build an institution and leveraging personal assets as security deposits. Another participant of The Story Project captured the unbounded nature of her volunteering, as a teacher of scripture, by saying: "Can you really be 'time poor' in acts of care?" Informal voluntary activities, then, take place irrespective of time – in some instances, out of duty and a sense of obligation, and in others (such as in the case of Sophie), when formal relationships with refugee families blend into the personal and the familial.

By conceptualising volunteering as a continuum depicted through the Volunteering Gradient, it may be possible to better situate the role of institutions and organisation (at the centre) in enabling and sustaining the informal domain – even as the latter remains unbounded and un-institutionalised in its entirety. In so doing, the research departs from dominant conceptualisations of informal volunteering as an activity that is bereft of institutions. In other words, there is a tendency in current definitions to categorise 'informal volunteering' as an activity that is 'un-mediated through institutions', as opposed to 'formal volunteering' that is institutionalised and mediated through organisations.[52] On the other hand, viewing informal volunteering from

the lens of institution building reinforces the important role of institutions (both current and potential) in sustaining the informal domain and uplifting the broader volunteering ecosystem – even if the nature of informal volunteering remains largely un-institutionalised.

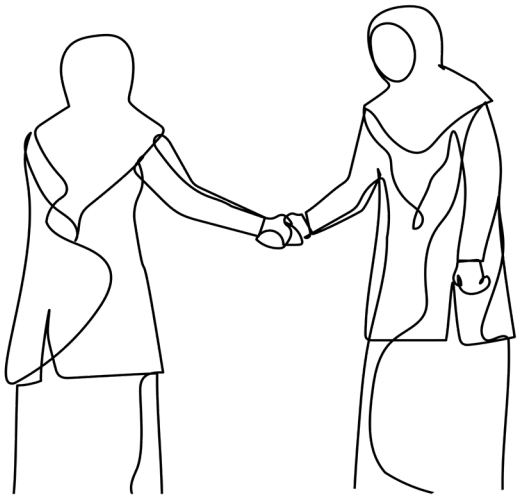
Several participants of The Story Project reiterated the necessity of having their informal associations and committees register as legal entities to gain recognition from the wider community, to raise funds, and solicit grants from the government – even if they continued to be driven by only few individual volunteers and without an office space. In addition to this necessity to formalise in order to maintain the longevity and sustainability of their activities, informal volunteering also drew upon relational support and social capital from formal volunteer involving organisations. The story of Zubair highlights the relational support he drew from his connections at the Red Cross and Relationships Australia in order to develop the Pashtun Association of South Australia. Similarly, Sophie's engagements with refugee families underscored the importance of trust-building which, in the first instance, came from her role as a 'formally trained and inducted' volunteer with a mainstream organisation.

These forms of material and relational support, however, did not just move in one direction, solicited by the informal domain from the formal domain. Rather, on the other end of the spectrum, some participants of The Story Project described – in their capacity as employees of not-for-profit associations and national peak bodies – the importance of tapping into the informal domain. A member of the Australian Refugee Association, for instance, described the challenges recruiting 'formal' volunteers for their programs, which ranged from intensive support programs covering mental health and disability support to low intensity social connections programs for refugee families. Regardless of the program type, the participant described the significance of recruiting volunteers who could not only speak the same language as the refugee community in question, in addition to having critical awareness of cultural and socio-political sensitivities for those arriving from conflict zones. In instances such as these,

mainstream volunteer involving organisations often looked to informal networks including faith-based organisations to identify community leaders:

> **"If we design a project or a program to help a certain group or a certain community, we try to recruit a few volunteers from within the community – maybe in consult with community leaders to make sure that we can get the right people to support the project. While the concept of volunteering is clearer among established communities, this is less so in emerging communities. But often, members from emerging communities are well placed to work with refugee families due to cultural and linguistic proximity."**

Whilst highlighting the challenges of recruiting the right kinds of volunteers for such programs, such conversations also underscored the importance of fostering greater relational ties between the formal voluntary sector and informal community networks. Conceptualising the relationship between formal and informal volunteering as a continuum may, then, allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the volunteering ecosystem, as well as the ways in which one may benefit from the other.



PART IV: CONCLUSION: POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

The Story Project has endeavored to offer a broad canvas of informal volunteering among multicultural communities in Australia. It moves away from a deficit-based approach to understanding volunteering among culturally diverse communities, and seeks to highlight an abundance of varied engagements, most of which can be located within the informal voluntary domain. Furthermore, it showcases how these activities act as a nodal point through which community is constituted, and a sense of belonging to a place is established. As such, then, these activities serve as an important prism through which Australian multiculturalism may be understood and horizontal ties may be established among community members – both inter- as well as intra-culturally. In conclusion, given the salience of these activities in building community, the report ends with some preliminary reflections on how the policy domain might better recognise and support the diverse domain of informal volunteering within multicultural settings.

Addressing the Question of Cultural Translation vis-à-vis Volunteering

Voluntary activities among multicultural communities can often be rendered 'invisible' in large-scale surveys. This under-representation and invisibilisation may signal a definitional issue regarding existing categorisations and situated understandings of informal volunteering. Concurrently, it also raises a methodological question, signaling the need for further in-depth qualitative studies to understand different sites and forms of informal volunteering.

In the case of this report, an interpretive and story-based approach to informal volunteering reveals several compounding reasons for a statistical under-representation of voluntary activities within diverse communities. Many of these activities, for instance, may be understood through different cultural and linguistic concepts. Other activities, inflected with faith and religious understandings, may not seek individual recognition and platform, preferring instead to be showcased in terms of their collective spirit and ethos. This raises the larger question of acknowledging and appreciating cultural translation vis-à-vis volunteering and allowing alternative concepts of volunteering to be recognised and supported on the terms of its situated participants. This question of cultural translation also becomes relevant in understanding the relationship of informal volunteering with the question of employability, and in addressing how job recruitment practices may factor and consider the coincidental benefits of informal volunteering.

Recognising the Value of Faith-based Volunteering and Culturally Specific Sites of Volunteering

The Story Project highlights faith-based networks and cultural associations as important sites of volunteering. Faith based sites, such as churches, mosques, and gurdwaras, play an important role in maintaining and preserving the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of community members. They also offer resources to ease the settlement journey of recent migrants through informal support and counsel, interim accommodation, as well as material resources through fundraising. Furthermore, they can provide free meals to community members on important occasions, thereby reducing financial load on families in need and providing fertile occasions to develop social connections. These initiatives include soup kitchens, iftar (30 days breaking the fast in Ramadan for the Muslim community) or the weekly *langar* (community kitchen) in Sikh Gurdwaras. Further evidence emerged through The Story Project on how these sites can be mobilised to provide material support to concerned members

during times of individual as well as collective crises, such the 2020 Bushfires, COVID-19 lockdowns and 2022 floods.

Similarly, cultural associations also emerged as important sites that helped in the settlement journey of emerging communities, in addition to providing space for the cultural preservation and development of established communities. Whilst these sites were often exclusive to a community, allowing different community members to feel validated and recognised, they also sought broader recognition and engagement with the Australian society by representing their rituals and festivals. In several instances, however, cultural associations struggled to maintain themselves financially, or find appropriate venues to host their events. As a result, these associations could only serve as a network of community members rather than as organisations resourced to provide services to its community members. On several occasions, members of cultural associations described their struggle to register their networks as charities and legal entities, highlighting the absence of readily available information as well as legible procedures and rules. The findings of The Story Project highlight the importance of cultural associations as a site of in-depth case study, given their salient role in contributing to Australian multiculturalism in a bottom-up fashion.

Recognising and supporting informal volunteering through a comprehensive whole-of-the-ecosystem approach

A more robust conceptualisation of informal volunteering and its relationship with formal volunteering is crucial for understanding bottom-up and horizontal forms of belonging in multicultural Australia. Furthermore, it may also address the question of better recognition and support for the volunteering ecosystem as a whole. To this end, this report makes some preliminary research recommendations:

- To move beyond the conceptualisation of the informal domain as un-structured, ad-hoc, or uninstitutionalised, and emphasise the informal volunteering as value-based activities. These activities can be either relational in nature or relational in their processes – i.e., conducted within settings that are organised relationally more than bureaucratically. For instance, in some cases community groups register their networks as legal entities and achieve some degree of formalisation in order to gain recognition, fundraise, and maintain accountability of donations. Nevertheless, these networks or associations come together and operate relationally on the basis of social networks and community ties, rather than institutionalised processes of recruitment, management, and retention.
- To emphasise the importance of preserving the informal voluntary domain in its own right, on its own terms, and with its implicit value-system intact.
- To conceptualise informal volunteering as an early foundation for institution-building – rather than an activity that is necessarily un-mediated by and bereft of institutions. Informal and formal volunteering may be better understood as a continuum that can be mediated or supported by institutions to varying degrees. To put institutions back into the continuum does not mean formalising or institutionalising the myriad of activities that fall outside the domain of volunteer involving organisations. Rather, it draws attention to intersectionalities between the formal and the informal voluntary domains.
- To understand how informal activities may draw upon material, infrastructural as well as ideational support from other formal organisations as well as informal networks. An in-depth study of existing relations within and across the informal and formal domains may allow for an informed policy approach towards strengthening informal volunteering and also uplifting the whole volunteering ecosystem in a mutually beneficial fashion.

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