

Building Bridges in Times of Conflict

A Toolkit for Young Leaders



This project has been funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services under the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program

The Building Bridges in Times of Conflict: Program Overview

For the past seven years, the Australian Multicultural Foundation has been actively involved in leadership programs for young Australians. The training has included civics and media sessions, and community capacity-building. With this body of work, the AMF has built an extensive network of community leaders who have been trained in leadership, public relations, public speaking, conflict resolution, volunteerism and project work.

The Building Bridges Project, funded by the Department of Social Services under the Diversity and Social Cohesion Programme, aims to engage young Australians from around Australia to participate in addressing some of the community harmony challenges.

Throughout this program the youth leaders will engage in conflict resolution strategies and 'get to know' sessions with community and faith leaders from the wider community in order to break down perceived barriers which may be hindering inter communal engagement.

Introduction

International events can have an impact on social cohesion and community harmony within local communities in Australia and in some cases may lead to threats and violence. This can undoubtedly divide local communities and increase the level of fear and anxiety – all of which can present barriers to social cohesion.

Purpose of the Toolkit

The purpose of this toolkit is to serve as a resource and reference point for facilitators during discussion sessions. The toolkit will:

- Provide a framework to engage interested community groups in discussion.
- Provide information on issues that may create tension between communities / groups.
- Provide ways of approaching intolerant behaviours particularly where they impact negatively on social cohesion and community harmony.
- Raise awareness of the impact that broader international community conflicts can have on Australian communities.
- Discuss strategies for managing and resolving differences.

'Dos and Don'ts' for Resolving Difference and Conflict

Working with focus groups and facilitating or participating in large discussions can be challenging and involves effective **conflict resolution** methods. Below are some 'Dos and Don'ts' when engaging in conflict resolution.

DO:	DON'T:
Come in with an open mind	Come in unwilling to learn
Listen to the views of others	Dismiss the opinions of others
Participate actively in discussion	Internalise your ideas
Encourage others to participate	Exclude other group members
Show respect	Interrupt
Share your perspective respectfully and rationally	Enforce your point of view upon the rest of the group
Ask questions	Stay silent if you are unsure
Respect your facilitator	Disregard your facilitator
Stick to task at hand	Fixate on any one debate
Address the issue not the person	Stereotype
Voice your concerns moderately	Raise your voice
Work as a team	Isolate yourself
Try new approaches	Stick to only what you know
Turn your ideas into action	Remain passive
Reflect on the process and the themes raised throughout the discussion	Leave your gained knowledge and ideas at the door

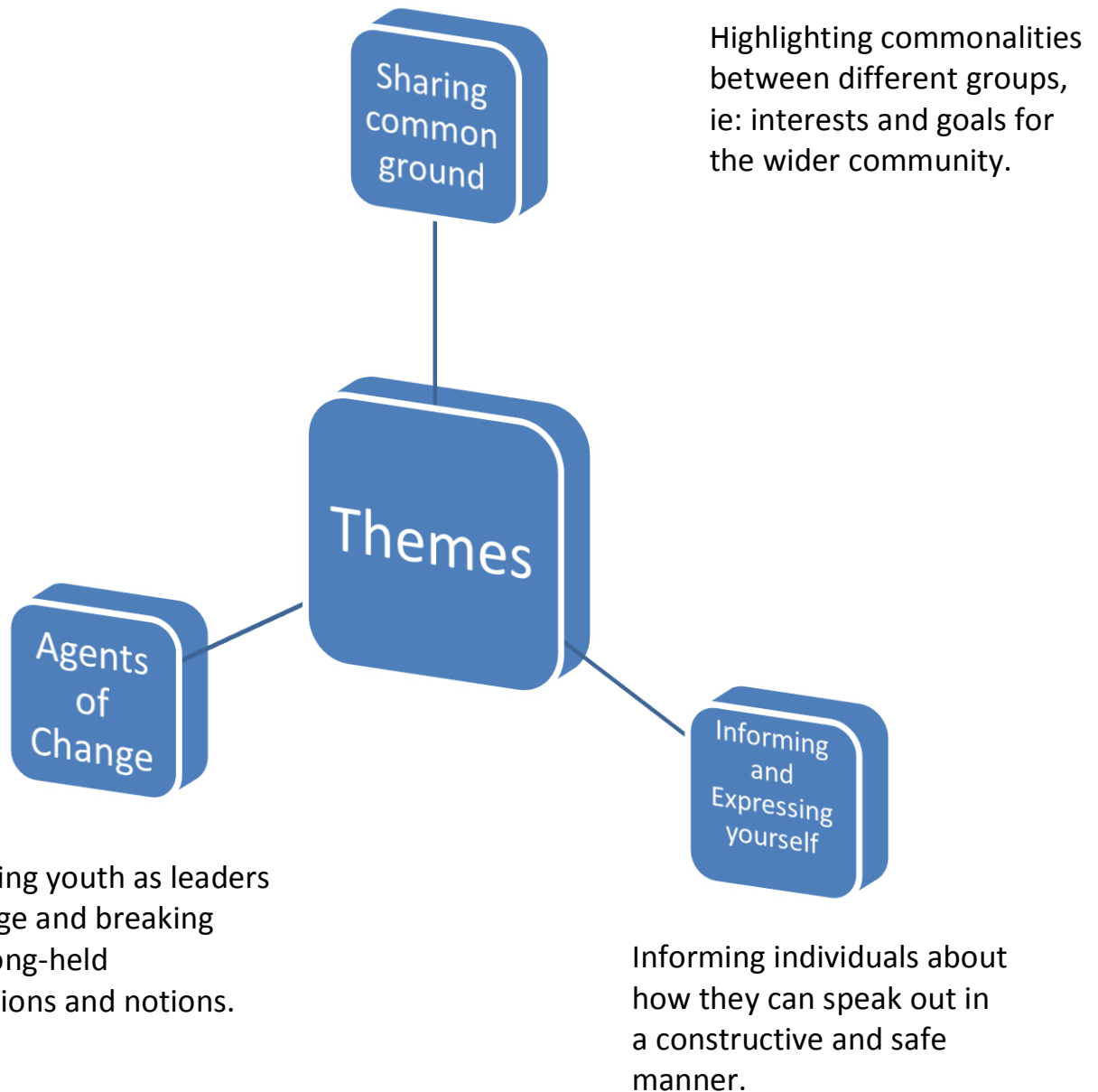
Sources:

<http://www.crnhq.org/pages.php?pid=10>

<http://www.amf.net.au/entry/the-australian-muslim-youth-leadership-and-peer-mentorship-program>

Framework for Discussion

The Framework for Discussion sets out three key areas around which you can frame your discussions, with strategies you can use to facilitate discussion and action. These strategies are explained in more detail in the following pages. There may also be many other themes that will support you to engage participants in discussion.



Some Discussion Points

1) Ideological (religious and political) differences

a) Belief Systems

Differences in belief systems can lead to **tensions** within a community.

The tensions between groups who hold different interpretations can stem from conflicting perceptions as to who has the 'true' or 'proper' belief systems due to theological or cultural differences in practice.

Hostilities can create an environment which can lead to violence, both ideological and physical. Unfortunately, conflicts of this nature remain today.

During discussions:

- Allow members of different groups to express their perceptions and ideas of one another. Encourage a respectful exchange, where perceptions, ideas and views can be challenged in a productive manner, serving as a myth-busting session.
- While acknowledging the history between the different groups, work with them to shift the focus of their discussion to the present and future.
- Provide examples where different groups 'cultural or religious' have worked together effectively and harmoniously for mutual benefit.

Discussion point: Can you think of other examples of cooperation between different groups in your own community?

Strategies – Agents of Change

- Engaging young adults to lead the way in building relationships between groups with the following projects:
 - Young leaders could participate and assist in the organisation of local events. This not only allows for engagement between the various groups but also the wider community. For example, Harmony Day events and activities provide an opportunity to learn and understand how all Australians from diverse backgrounds equally belong to this nation and enrich it. More information on Harmony Day is available at: www.harmony.gov.au

- Development of youth networks (run by the young leaders themselves, in-person) could be introduced in different cities. This essentially empowers youth by giving them some sense of responsibility to initiate and facilitate stronger relationships between community groups who may be experiencing tensions.
- Coordinating creative projects using the arts, media or journalism as a platform for youth to engage in community dialogue.

Please Take 10 minutes to brainstorm further ideas as agents of change to address community tensions.

b) Political Ideology

In some cases the motivation for violent extremism may be political. Some ideologies seek to justify violence based on patriotism, or a belief of superiority to other cultures and races.

During discussions:

- Discuss common contributing factors that groups affected by overseas conflict might share – uncertainty of the livelihood of their loved ones, uncertainty of the political outcomes in their country of origin and trauma over injustices that have been perpetrated.
- Emphasise the greater goal of safety and stability.
- Address the danger of violent extremism. Discuss consequences (legal and other) of engaging in those behaviours. Open up discussion on other ways people can give voice to their concerns and fears.

Strategies – Sharing Common Ground

- Political harmony through dialogue to build a relationship of trust, reciprocity and mutual responsiveness.

Reconciliation is extremely challenging to achieve and rests on an individual's willingness to be understanding and be empathetic. Leadership and the ability of trainers to motivate other individuals in this respect are crucial.

Please Take 10 minutes to brainstorm further ideas in sharing the common ground in building positive relationships.

2) Emotional Impacts

Anti-social behaviour between different groups can also have adverse emotional impacts on families and communities.

International conflict can cause understandable frustration and anxiety for local communities regarding the safety of their family members and the social, economic and political stability of their home country. It may also evoke other emotions of pride, anger or confusion. The physical distance from loved ones and feelings of lack of control may exacerbate and heighten emotions which can cause people to exercise poor decision-making and lead to other anti-social behaviour.

Adding to the complexity of the situation may be feelings of unease among members of minority communities, preventing them from 'speaking out' about acts of aggression that have been taking place. Many individuals refuse to speak about what is happening in the community, or the abuse they have faced due to the safety risks it poses to their family. Consequently, a sense of hesitance, distrust and exclusion can develop.

Encouraging communities and individuals to explore how they feel and what they can do may prove useful.

During discussions:

- Open up a space in which individuals can express their feelings.
- Work together to devise and recommend strategies that individuals and the community can use to overcome these feelings of hesitance, distrust and exclusion.
- Explore ways that communities and individuals can safely speak out about their concerns.
- Be clear that violence as a means of settling differences is illegal and unhelpful to the local community.

Strategies – Informing and Expressing Yourself

- Develop education programs on political expression and reporting incidents in the community. These can help to inform the community on how to respond constructively to situations rather than resorting to measures such as negative campaigns on social media or public acts of aggression to voice their discontent. It may also be self-empowering to those who are otherwise reluctant to speak out, or who are unaware of the resources and reporting mechanisms available to them.

Topics could include:

- How to respond to/report an incident:
 - Concerns about human rights abuses locally and overseas.
 - Incidents in the community.
- Where to seek professional help regarding psychological wellbeing.
- Ideas for self-care

Please Take 10 minutes to brainstorm ideas on how to address heightened emotions in your local community as a result of external conflict:

Additional Resources

Resources related to conflict resolution in Australia:

<http://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/pages/home.aspx>

<http://www.crnhq.org/index.php>

<http://www.amf.net.au/>

Resources related to Mental Health:

<http://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/>

<http://www.headspace.org.au/>

Where to report an incident of violence or abuse:

<http://www.resilientcommunities.gov.au/informationadvice/Pages/where-can-i-go-for-help.aspx>

<http://www.humanrights.gov.au>

<http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au>

http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document_ID=2

<http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/>

http://www.antidiscrimination.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/adb/adb1_index.html