



## SUSTAINABLE HOUSEHOLDS IN MELBOURNE'S WEST

### Investigating adoption of sustainable practices in our diverse communities

How motivated are Melbourne's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities when it comes to adopting sustainable energy and water saving practices? What barriers currently exist and how can these be overcome?

These questions were central to a recent project, funded by the Victorian Government Sustainability Fund, led by Maribyrnong City Council (MCC) and conducted by researchers from Victoria University (VU). Given the nature of the topic, the project was also supported by the Western Alliance for Greenhouse Action (WAGA) and the Real Estate Institute of Victoria.



The project focussed on two key communities in the MCC: the Vietnamese, as the largest CALD community in the area; and the Sudanese, the fastest growing. Hearing the voices of these two community groups was critical to the success of the project, which aimed to develop strategies to support improved sustainable practices in the home. Equally relevant to the project were the opinions of identified 'gatekeepers' – landlords, real estate agents and relevant government agencies.

Consequently, in late 2010 and early 2011, eight focus groups were held (four with the Vietnamese community and four with the Sudanese), each consisting of up to ten representatives. Seven interviews were also completed in early 2011 with representatives from state and local government, estate agents, and consumer advocacy groups.

### What the results tell us – motivations and barriers

#### The Sudanese community and sustainability

Members of the Sudanese community were seen by a number of the identified 'gatekeepers' as too focussed on basic survival in a new land to be concerned about environmental sustainability. Also, having come from a country ravaged by drought where water shortages were associated with failed infrastructure, it was argued, people in this community did not necessarily equate Australia with drought affliction and did not, as a consequence, worry about conserving water. In terms of energy saving, it was believed, Sudanese communities were being taught by migrant support services how to use appliances, but not how to use them *efficiently*.

These views were not, however, echoed by the Sudanese community. Participants in the focus groups expressed their understanding of the importance of sustainability and their willingness to learn strategies to save energy and reduce costs. The majority of participants were renting their homes and those in single dwellings already had access to kerb-side recycling, sustainable lighting options and took advantage of available retrofitting programs. Many also grew their own vegetables – a highly-valued cultural activity.

While they shared a desire to adopt sustainable practices, those living in high or low-rise public housing, however, spoke of the constraints they faced in trying to contribute. In these living spaces there were no options for recycling, composting had been stopped due to health concerns and there were often long waiting periods for gaining a plot in a community garden. Another major problem raised by focus group members was shared billing. Some focus group participants commented that as



individuals they tried to reduce energy consumption, and therefore cut costs, but because bills were aggregated across several units (and not everybody made efforts to save energy), there was often no cost reduction and therefore no great incentive to change their habits.

### **The Vietnamese community and sustainability**

The Vietnamese community were seen by 'gatekeepers' to be much more attuned to ideas of sustainability. This, it was believed, was because they had come from a wet tropical nation, which contrasted greatly to drought-prone Australia. Water saving therefore seemed much more important. In addition, it was argued, the Vietnamese community were now well-established in Melbourne and, as such, had far fewer settlement issues and more time to focus on environmental sustainability than their Sudanese neighbours. They were also considered to be 'price conscious' and much more aware of the rebates available to support sustainable programs and infrastructure.

Most of these perceptions were reinforced by the Vietnamese focus group participants who stated that they were well aware of numerous ways to implement sustainability in their homes. They were also motivated by cultural values of living harmoniously with their environment. Focus group participants gave accounts of their own sustainable contributions through the use of low wattage lighting, water tanks, solar panels and composting, but *only* when their finances permitted. Frustration was shared around the difficulties of accessing and understanding government subsidies and rebates. Home renters also indicated that there was some reluctance among landlords to implement changes for the sake of sustainability. However, renters still adopted a range of activities, including harvesting water, using energy-efficient lighting and recycling regularly.

### **Encouraging positive changes**

The focus groups and interviews provided a good 'snapshot' of attitudes about sustainability, both *within* and *about* CALD communities, as well as some misperceptions. Discussions also validated many of the strategies that are already being implemented across Melbourne to improve sustainable household behaviours. However, the study suggests that there are still opportunities for further improving sustainable practices in the CALD community homes. These improvements can be grouped into four key domains: infrastructure; incentives; education; and communications. They can be summarised as follows:

#### **Infrastructure**

- Provide access to basic services (such as recycling) to all householders, including those in public housing estates.
- Provide better hard rubbish collection programs to retain the aesthetics of neighbourhood environments.
- Encourage 'No junk mail' signs on letter boxes to minimise brochure waste.
- Create more opportunities for community gardens in housing estates.

#### **Incentives**

- Consider subsidies for the purchase of compost bins.
- If individual energy billing arrangements cannot be implemented, devise incentives for co-operation among neighbours in housing estates to reduce energy costs *collectively*.

#### **Education**

- Educate 'gatekeepers' about the positive attitudes and knowledge that members of the Vietnamese and Sudanese communities already have about sustainability.
- Help CALD community members to understand water and energy bills that are calculated on their actual consumption. This will allow them to monitor and alter their energy and water consumption accordingly.
- Educate and remind community members about the various sustainable products and services that are available and simple behaviours that they can adopt.
- Engage with the community through 'community champions'; educate these champions in sustainable practices so that they may act as advocates within their communities.
- Organise field trips for community leaders or champions to dams, recycling stations and water treatment plants to educate them about relevant infrastructure.



## Communication

- Encourage shared voices, with councils and communities working closely together.
- Have a council presence (preferably with interpreters) in community gatherings, such as festivals or group meetings, to showcase best practices in sustainability.
- Tailor communications *for* each community (in English, Vietnamese and Dinka at the very least) and *within* each community, to account for community diversity, dialects, and different housing environments.
- Using different technologies and images rather than words.
- Make communication messages simple and easy to understand (e.g. fridge magnets, checklists etc.).
- Establish community forums around sustainable living (e.g. composting, etc.) in accessible community venues.
- Develop online games and role plays for children about sustainable behaviours.

These suggested areas of improvement provide a platform for further discussion and action. The study itself has created a foundation for exploring other areas of sustainable practice, as well as attitudes and practices in other municipalities.

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