

Melbourne Eastern Metropolitan Region

**Strengthening Volunteering and Civic Participation:
Development of a Strategic Plan**

Building a Conceptual & Strategic Framework

Regional Volunteering Stakeholders Workshop #1

Thursday, 28th June 2007, 10 am – 4 pm

**Whitehorse Centre, Waratah Room, Whitehorse Civic Centre,
379 – 397 Whitehorse Road, Nunawading**



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Introduction

The Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) Management Forum commissioned the Borderlands Cooperative – via the City of Knox – to develop a Strategic Plan that will provide recommendations for *strengthening the commitment to volunteering in the EMR*, in ways that will support communities, especially the vulnerable, and strengthen the civic participation and social connectedness of residents in the EMR. This was based on an Outcomes' Framework for Volunteering and Civic Participation that was agreed to by participants at a Regional Volunteering Development Workshop held on 8th February 2007 (see Appendix 1). The four key elements of this relate to:

1. volunteering growth and diversity
2. enhanced volunteering capacity for more sustainable volunteering outcomes
3. volunteering in the region better linked to other relevant sectors
4. increased profile of volunteering and its contribution to the community.

Borderlands has commenced work in February 2007, developing a conceptual platform for the project and devising a sampling strategy to select a number of agencies within each of the seven municipalities, assuring a meaningful spread across the various dimensions of volunteering and civic participation/engagement. We have been guided in this endeavour by an Executive Reference Group and a Project Team, both derived from the several municipalities and the Government Departments linked with the project.

We have meanwhile collected information through conducting almost 200 interviews across the region and have gathered a great variety of written documents - both conceptual and research-based, and local, Victorian, national and international – which we have attempted to make sense of and share a (very) summarised version of in this document. The document is organised as follows:

1. Emerging framework towards a conceptual and strategic framework
2. Profile of the EMR in terms of volunteering and civic participation, based on our research and linked with foundational 'principles' and sustainability 'dimensions' as discussed in the course of the interviews held in the region
3. Strategic areas and options for discussion and further consideration.

1. Emerging Framework

Trying to bring together two concepts which have not traditionally been thought to be in an obvious relationship – *volunteering* and *civic participation* – and linking them with additional notions of *community strengthening* and with the potential *roles of governments* at all levels is not a simple exercise. Practitioners (workers), program coordinators, funding bodies, governments and, not least, those who offer their energies and time themselves - whatever name we give them, e.g. volunteers, activists, 'members', carers... – will have very different perspectives on and expectations of all these concepts. Dialogue – if it happens – is often marked by misunderstandings and seemingly incompatible expectations. Whilst the project was not resourced to survey volunteers/those engaged in civic 'matters', those we did

interview were – in their specific ways – ‘expert witnesses’ to what is meant with - and practiced as - volunteering and civic participation. The obvious practical as well as conceptual interest shown by all those who participated has been very encouraging.

We are also encouraged by the *strategic ‘conclusions’* from the ‘*Tracking what works: Voluntary activity, community strengthening and local government*’ project (2006, Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights, Deakin University and Municipal Association of Victoria). Addressed at Local Councils and, therefore, eminently applicable to our present project, the authors of that document conclude by suggesting to:

- Build a *conceptual* and *strategic* framework for approaching voluntary activity (and civic participation - BL)
- Articulate a *working definition* of voluntary activity (and civic participation - BL)
- Develop a *working definition* of community and community strengthening
- Investigate the *specific changes* and *challenges* that affect voluntary activity (and civic participation - BL) in local communities
- Explore *new thinking* on voluntary activity (and civic participation - BL)
- Draw upon *existing knowledge*, experience and resources
- *Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches*
- Share ideas and strategies through *networks*.

In a similar spirit and quite agreeing with the general tendency of the above suggestions, we offer a pictorial scheme which attempts to conceptualise volunteering and civic participation.¹

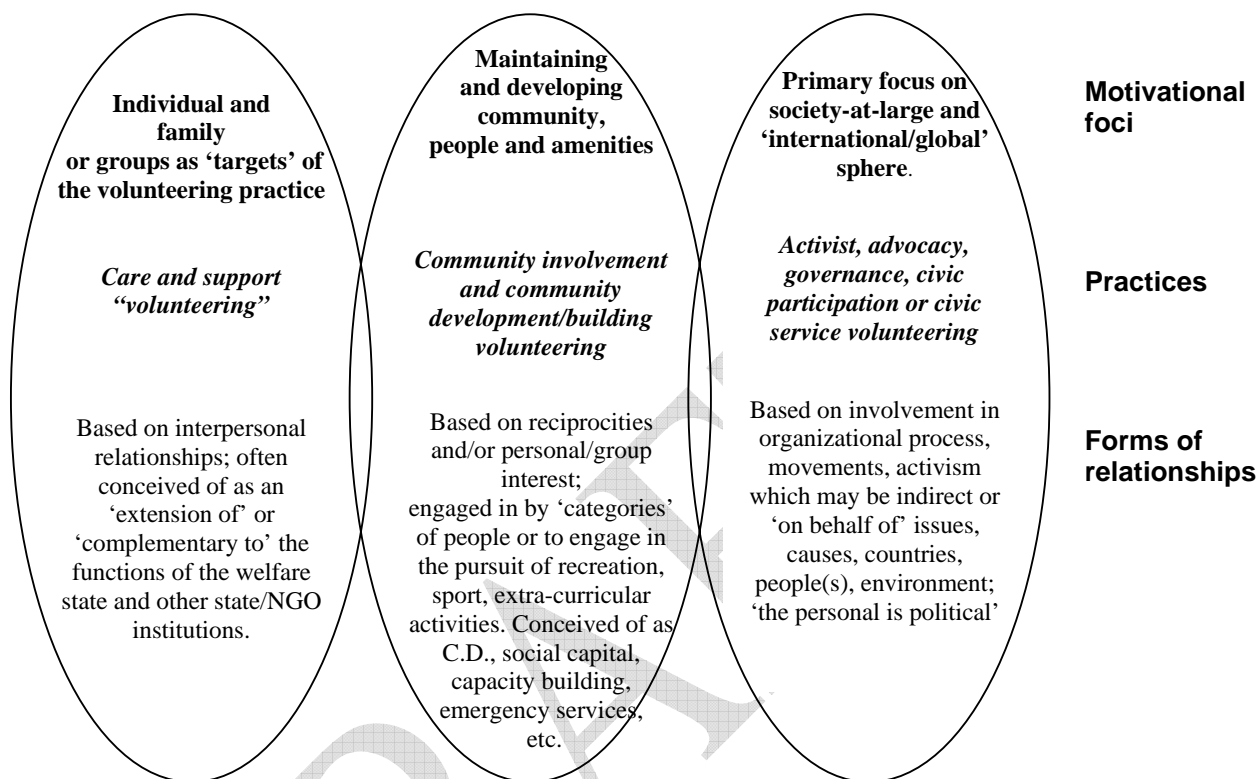
A Borderlands evolved framework

This conceptual framework has evolved from several previous practice projects Borderlands has been involved in and is equally based on a large selection of literature – research-based and theoretical-conceptual - of which we will offer an annotated selective list later in the project. It is loosely built around the creative dynamic between

- three broad *motivational foci* of the volunteering/civic participation activities, ranging from individuals and families, to local or interest communities, to the societal/global foci
- *practices* ranging from care and support volunteering, to community ‘development’, to activism/advocacy/governance volunteering/civic participation
- and the typical *forms of relationships* engaged in ranging from the interpersonal, to group reciprocities, and organisational or indirect relationships.

¹ In Appendix 2, we reproduce an edited, alternative scheme from a major US-based research project that sought to ‘measure’ volunteering.

Conceptual Framework for Volunteering & Civic Participation



The overlaps in the above figure are obviously deliberate; the categorisations are not meant to be rigid and mutually exclusive but they are intended to be seen to overlap and dynamically relate. They do, however, provide a possibility to reflect on the role volunteering and civic participation play in the larger context of societies and on how they relate to other institutional and policy processes and structures with an eye on developing more meaningful strategies to support the former.

Community development/strengthening and the role of governments

Community development/strengthening and the role of governments have been two additional items to take into the conceptual framework; it would render the size of this document too large, however, and we will endeavour to elaborate more on these concepts in the context of subsequent work associated with this project. As we move from the elaboration of strategies towards their implementation, the linkages between volunteering/civic participation, government(s) and community strengthening will obviously play a greater part.

2. Profile of the EMR

Geographical areas according to institutional context

The EMR is highly (sub) urbanised except for the outer reaches of Manningham and the Yarra Ranges, meaning that rural and ‘interface’ areas with lower population densities face considerable barriers in terms of accessing services and engaging in civic initiatives. Most people ‘volunteer’ close to where they live although this is difficult for residents of Yarra Ranges and parts of Manningham. Other exceptions are those who seek specific work experience and those who participate in organisations that operate beyond their local territory (certain activist or civic engagement groups working on social and global issues).

We approached representatives of organisations whose programmatic spread was very local (such as community houses and faith-based); municipality-wide (such as city council and community welfare services); across municipalities (such as multicultural educational services); regional-based (such as the Migrant Information Centre); and state-wide albeit with regional branches (such as the Country Fire Authority) and nation-wide and international (such as Friends of East Timorese communities).

Functional and categorical areas according to institutional context

The tasks and practices engaged in by volunteers and those working under the notion of ‘civic participation’ cover a vast range – from direct person-to-person work to occupying positions on Boards; as well, a vast array of groups are being addressed through the activities engaged in by volunteers; pages 1 – 3 in the Summary EMR profile offer a snapshot of this variety.

Thematic highlights

“Australia would just come to a standstill without volunteers...things just wouldn’t happen... The contribution that volunteers make is under-rated.”
[Coordinator of program in a community house]

- **Civic engagement:** Certain forms of volunteering and civic engagement are un- or under-recognised as they do not understand their ‘work’ as volunteering or as ‘civic participation’; we have noted a change in some people’s motivations away from traditional views towards notions of *co-production* as mutually beneficial, larger than the self, and seeking for alternative ways of living in sustainable communities. Demographic changes as well as changes in motivation towards participation in volunteering activities have been mentioned numerous times, especially volunteering in preparation for the job market amongst young people and Centrelink volunteering.
- **Barriers to volunteering & civic engagement:** People of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (including Indigenous people), those living with disabilities and the young are underrepresented in all forms of volunteering we encountered. There are a number of (potential) barriers to volunteering including

lack of appropriate personnel, physical barriers, the increase in formal and regulatory (especially insurance and fear-of-litigation) procedures and the lack of certain kinds of activities for certain groups of potential volunteers.

- **Governance/management:**
 - *National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not for Profit Organisations:* an unknown entity to many small organisations!
 - *'Centrelink' volunteers:* for many an 'aberration' of volunteering as well as 'extra work without proper funding.'
 - *Recruitment:* word-of-mouth and 'as needed' are the two operational notions, especially for small organisations
 - *Training:* lack of resources and free opportunities, except for those organisations funded for Home and Community Care (HACC) or other government-funded service delivery.
 - *Police and working with children checks:* whilst the Crimcheck process is about ready to be rolled out to certain agencies, there is still a lack of knowledge and the present delays are still putting people off from volunteering.
 - *Acknowledgement of volunteers/civic activity:* agreement on the importance of offering it, but equal agreement on the lacking realisation of the importance of volunteering and civic participation for the maintenance of the 'fabric of the community'.
- **Resources & infrastructure:** Funding and infrastructure are still very much lacking; it is too much assumed that volunteering and civic engagement 'just happens'; as well, there is a lack of awareness of the resources and infrastructure which *does* exist, notably Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs).
- **Responses to suggested foundational principles (see Appendix 3):** The overall response to the foundational principles was positive and confirming; many of our interviewees mentioned that they could/should become part of a volunteering 'charter' for the region and, as a model, beyond the region. Especially the 'principles' of localism and diversification of the volunteer and 'civic participants' pool found approval, with many commenting that the changing population profiles sometimes put established agencies at a loss to find volunteers for 'traditional' roles.
- **Responses to sustainability framework (see Appendix 4):** The responses to the six 'elements' of the sustainability framework were overwhelmingly positive; many of the people we talked to suggested that they may become established **as the basis of the to-be-developed overall strategy to support volunteering and civic participation/engagement**. Many commented on the importance of linking the 'resource- and system' requirements of sustaining volunteering and civic participation with the 'people' requirements, especially the need for consideration of 'relationships' and 'culture', which are often forgotten in the 'haste' to recruit needed volunteer staff or partners in the civic participation activities.

3. Strategic areas and options for discussion and further consideration

Localism

The idea that volunteering and civic participation options should be available and created as closely as possible to where people live has been a recurring theme across all municipalities and across the gamut of agencies and groups. An important strategic discussion needs to be had around the possible role of ***community development/strengthening processes***, the appropriate location of support structures and infrastructure (such as VRCs) as well as the role(s) of government(s) at different levels to strengthen localism and ‘place-based’ policies and processes.

Inclusiveness

Calls for and suggestions to improve inclusiveness have been persistent; it seems that all too often people with disabilities, young people, people of culturally diverse backgrounds, newly arrived and Indigenous people are ‘off the radar’ both in terms of their potential as volunteers/participants in civic endeavours and in terms of their needs for voluntary services. Several potential strategies point at a ‘standing committee’ at regional/municipality level, improving internal processes within and across agencies and organisations and adopting a ‘strength’ rather than a ‘deficit’ approach to (local) members of groups who tend to be excluded or – at least – overlooked.

Operational matters

Most of the issues encountered had to do with the necessary processes to recruit, train, sustain and celebrate those who put in time and effort into volunteering and civic participation. It seems that most strategic suggestions were directed at the need for more networking, collaboration – at least at the municipal level but also across municipalities and regionally – between organisations, especially also including the smaller ones who even more lack resources to fulfil all that is needed, quantitatively and qualitatively. Developing a municipal system – in the absence of a volunteer resource centre – would be an intermediate strategy to bring agencies and groups together to develop a collaborative network.

Approaching resources

Linkages with funding bodies and the need for resources have been – probably – the most frequently mentioned items in the course of our interviews, and this across all types of groups and organisations and across all municipalities (even if there have been divergent assessments of the degree of support received from the respective local councils). The fact that ‘running’ a volunteer program absorbs a lot of resources was commonly acknowledged and there was a degree of resentment about the ‘double burden’ of needing volunteers because of the absence of funding for paid staff and the absence of doing a proper job of getting the former and treating them appropriately. The possible strategies range from suggestions to re-think the relationship between the various levels of government and review their responsibilities (e.g. in terms of the establishment of a ‘subsidiarity’ relationship between central and local bodies) to the

need for more local resourcing approaches, especially the often mentioned community strengthening/building/development approaches.

Build a conceptual and strategic framework for approaching voluntary activity

We return to a phrase with which we started this report and which derived from other research commissioned by the Municipal Association of Victoria; it is necessary to build a ***conceptual*** and ***strategic*** framework for approaching voluntary activity and civic participation. This needs to be a framework which is capable of introducing new and more appropriate conceptual nomenclature to encompass ***all*** forms of voluntary and civic activity and which makes it possible to meaningfully re-present the role of the modes of social engagement and relationship building on personal, relational, organisational and societal levels. We suggest spending sufficient time to discuss elements and building blocks useful to develop as linking concepts between the ‘practical’ understanding of volunteering and civic engagement and their theoretical/political/organisational/ economic understandings.

DRAFT

Appendix 1: Outcomes' framework for Volunteering and Civic Participation in the Eastern Metropolitan Region

The Eastern Metropolitan Regional Management Forum, Volunteering and Civic Participation Project team has produced an Outcomes' Framework for Volunteering and Civic Participation in the Eastern Metropolitan Region based on the important issues nominated by participants at a Regional Volunteering Development Workshop held on 8 February 2006. This Outcomes' Framework will inform the Project's Mapping, Consultation and Data / Literature Review processes.

Outcomes' framework for Volunteering and Civic Participation in the Eastern Metropolitan Region

1. Volunteering growth and diversity:

- Sufficient volunteers to facilitate both service delivery and community strengthening;
- A broader range of volunteers, including more younger people, more full-time employees, more representatives of the corporate sector, more people with disabilities and a more culturally and linguistically diverse volunteer population; and
- New opportunities for volunteer participation and recognition.

2. Enhanced volunteering capacity for more sustainable volunteering outcomes:

- New and strengthened partnerships, resources, governance structures and networks to support and sustain volunteer and civic participation;
- Increased well-being of volunteers and clients, and stronger social networks and connections as a result of and a resource for volunteer participation; and
- Stronger, more extensive and more collaborative volunteer and community organizations which are attuned to the changing demographic, cultural and regulatory environment.

3. Volunteering in the region better linked to other relevant sectors:

- Stronger links with the education and training sector, both as a source of and a site for volunteers;
- Strengthened collaboration with the corporate sector; and
- Knowledge gained from collaboration between agencies to share with practitioners in other regions.

4. Increased profile of volunteering and its contribution to the community:

- Increased public profile for volunteering and greater public awareness of the value, roles, service provision options and local community contributions made by volunteers; and
- A broader understanding of what volunteering means, particularly that volunteering be seen as civic participation and community strengthening as well as a means for the delivery of services.

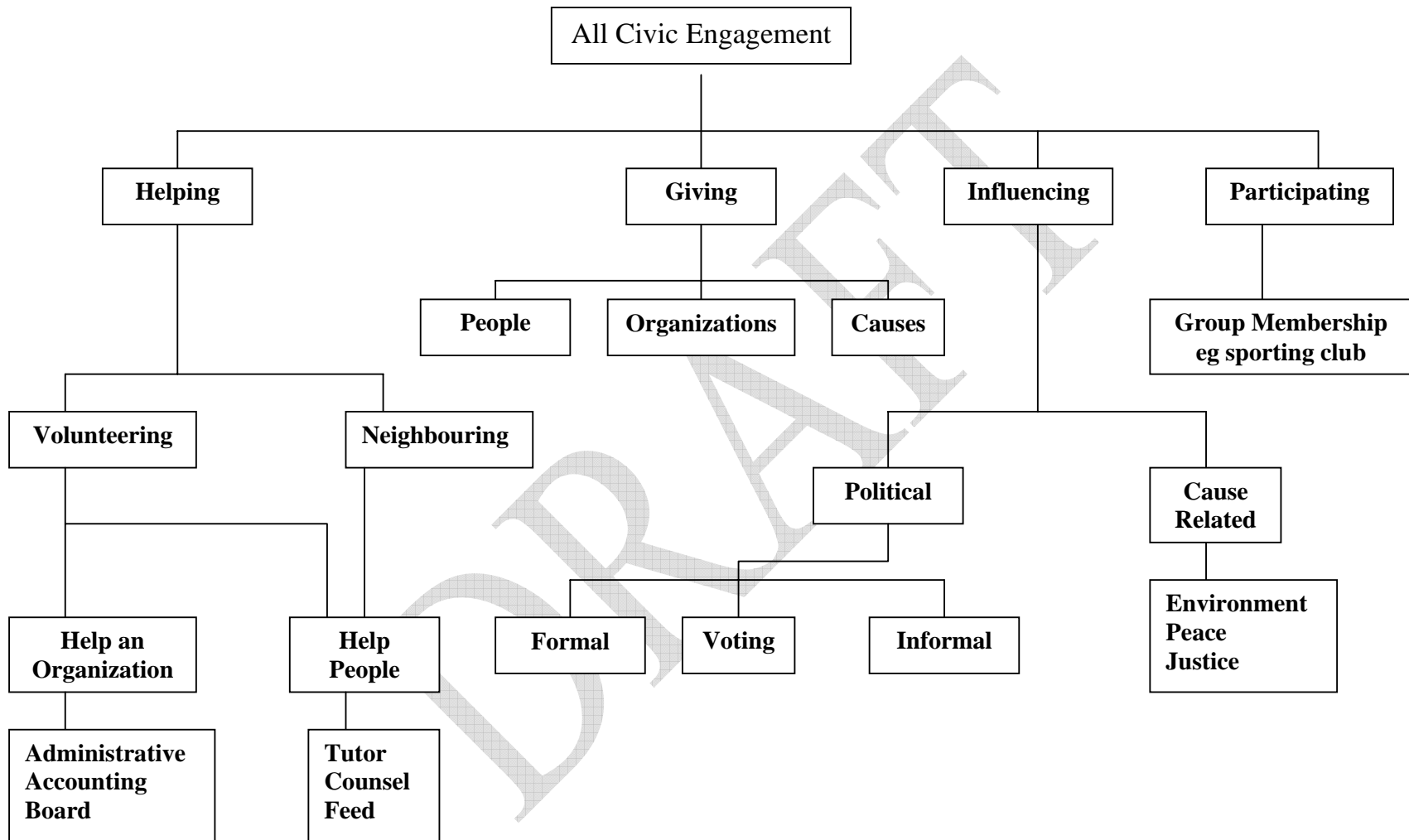
Appendix 2: Points of Light (US) conceptualisation of volunteering and civic participation

This framework emerged in the context of a major US-based research effort to ‘measure’ volunteering; they attempt to look at ‘activities’ effected within a volunteering/civic engagement context and they organise these activities under heading which progressively (from top to bottom) become more discrete and concrete. On the top you’ll find ‘motivational’ or ‘intentional’ categories (they refer to it as *civic engagement*); in the middle ‘row’ you’ll find the institutional or organisational ‘object’ of the motivation/intention; and at the bottom there are ‘practical’ activities or what psychologists (and Americans researchers...) like to refer to as ‘behaviours’. To give an idea of their considerations, here is an excerpt from their paper.

“...there were a number of questions raised about what would constitute volunteering within an organizational context. The distinction between volunteering for an organization so as to further its administrative ends (e.g., serving as a board member, doing pro bono legal work for the organization, keeping the books, fundraising, etc.) and helping to deliver services to people (e.g., being a coach, driving a van, delivering meals on wheels, etc.) came up over and over again.

One result of this discussion was the formulation of a framework for conceptualizing civic engagement...in which formal volunteering is shown to be but a piece of the overall picture. In this, *civic engagement* is conceptualized as having four main components: helping, giving, influencing and participating (note the continued emphasis on *verbs*). There are two kinds of helping: volunteering (formal volunteering) and neighbouring (informal volunteering). Under volunteering, there are two things people do: help an organization (serve on a board, do administrative work) and help people. Under neighbouring, there is helping people. This, then, subsumes volunteering and neighbouring into one category – helping – giving those of us who want to take the broader approach a way to do so. The other categories work the same way.”

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A Paradigm for Studying Civic Engagement



Appendix 3: Foundational Principles for Strategic Plan

Most interviewees were shown a copy of the following document, which we reproduce below, for discussion at the time of interview. Suggested changes were duly noted and will be incorporated in later formulations.

The proposed Strategic Plan to strengthen volunteering & civic participation in the EMR will be committed to the following principles:

1. Supporting the interests & needs of volunteers
2. Supporting the interests & needs of community organisations
3. Establishing the value of the voluntary work done and as a way of building reciprocity and relationships between people; this may derive from:
 - the developmental benefit to the individual
 - delivering a service
 - being connected to – or being part of – a community and/or being an active citizen
 - being involved in the preservation of heritage (as culture and the environment)
 - it being meaningful work
4. Promoting the principle of localism so that volunteers are encouraged to work as locally as possible.
5. Actively supporting the diversification of the volunteer pool to reflect the diversity of the residents of the EMR.
6. Establishing principles of transparency and cooperation amongst community organisations in terms of how resources concerning the management of volunteers are used in the EMR.
7. Promoting the principle that Federal and State levels of government should only perform functions that cannot be effectively and efficiently undertaken by Local government and/or more localised/proximate non-government or community organisations. That does not absolve the former, however, to resource/subsidise and otherwise support the latter.

Appendix 4: Sustainability Framework for Strategic Plan

This proposed framework is for assessing the Strategic Plan for strengthening volunteering and civic participation in the EMR. Most interviewees were shown a copy of the following document, which we reproduce below, for discussion at the time of the interview. Suggested changes were duly noted and will be incorporated in later formulations.

In order of importance, the framework involves:

1. Creating and maintaining *awareness* about volunteering & civic participation (i.e. the need for and the opportunity for) amongst citizens and government officers and legislators.
2. Initiating, encouraging, supporting *practices* expressive of and related to volunteering and civic participation and engagement.
3. Creating and enhancing *relationships* & understanding and practice of *participatory leadership*.
4. Developing and maintaining a *culture* of, for example, community, participation, spirit of cooperation, civic responsibility, reciprocity-based relationships and recognition/utilisation of these elements as present in defined cultural groups.
5. Establishing and maintaining the *systems & processes* operationally as well as 'figuratively' (i.e. in the everyday practices and relationships of people, of organisations, of existing 'systems' of, for example, service delivery)
6. *Resources* – human (personal/social 'energy'), material, financial, spatial, time, leadership.