

**Celebrating Culture, Celebrating  
Cultural Diversity:**

Sri Lankan New Year Celebration  
Event at Toongabbie, Western  
Sydney  
May 2023



NSW Service for the Treatment  
and Rehabilitation of Torture  
and Trauma Survivors

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## I. Executive summary

The purpose of this report is to present and discuss feedback provided by Keep in Contact (KiC) facilitators after the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration Event. KiC facilitators provided feedback at a facilitated focus group discussion conducted on Zoom. In addition, data from WhatsApp messages and some observations are included.

The KiC project is an extension of the successful STARTTS Older People in Cultural Transition (OPICT) program that response to the social isolation and emotional distress experienced by older people from CALD and refugee backgrounds. It has been made possible through the ongoing funding of the WentWest Primary Health Network

The KiC project organized a Sri Lankan New Year celebration event on Friday 5 May 2023 at St Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Toongabbie, Western Sydney. The event was funded by a one-off Multi-Cultural NSW grant supplemented by funding drawn from WentWest and their regular support of the KIC program. Two hundred and twenty people attended the event. The attendees came from diverse cultural backgrounds including Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Ukraine and Serbia.

The aim of the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event was to bring Keep in Contact (KiC) groups together to participate in a meaningful event packed with fun activities.

The Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event was a success. It offered participants meaningful experience. Some social capital objectives were achieved in areas including social connection and network (SCN), social capital relational norms (SCRN) and social capital enablers (SCE).



Participants enjoyed the event, shared culture, and learnt about other cultures. They felt empowered, more connected, and happier because of participating in the event. There is now expectation among KiC participants that each cultural group would be given an opportunity to celebrate their culture with others in the same way the Sri

Lankan community has done. Below are comments from facilitators and other attendees who participated in the event.

*It was really fantastic for my group and for me as well because it was the same platform with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India the same day. It was very good for my community. We really enjoyed it. (Facilitator 1)*

*Personally, I observed in the lunchroom. Everyone mixed up with everyone. When they were serving food, language went out of the window. Again, when they finished the program, they were telling “good” like this [show gestures – thumbs up]. (Project Officer)*

*A few in the group are new arrivals. They don't have family. They are not going anywhere. They enjoyed the event. They saw different cultures and performances. They liked it. They were really happy. (Facilitator 4)*

*While attending the Sri Lankan new year [event] along with several diverse communities, it reminded me, once again, that we are many, but we are one. (WhatsApp message from event attendee)*

*The Sri Lankan New year celebration and attendance by other nationalities was a true representation of Australia's multiculturalism. Hats off to the organizers for their devotion and hard work to make the event a grand success. The performers were unbelievable and only proved once again age is only a number. (WhatsApp message from event attendee)*

Areas for event improvement were identified. These include ensuring that there is enough time for groups to interact with each other, that food arrives on time and that only those who register attend.

## **II. Introduction**

### **Background**

The Keep in Contact (KIC) program organized a Sri Lankan New Year celebration event on Friday 5 May 2023 at St Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Toongabbie, Western Sydney. Two hundred and twenty people attended the event. The attendees came from diverse cultural backgrounds including Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Ukraine and Bosnia.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to present and discuss feedback provided by KiC facilitators after the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration Event.

### **Aim of the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration Event**

The aim of the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event was to bring Keep in Contact (KiC) groups together to participate in a meaningful event packed with fun activities.

## **III. Evaluation**

### **Social capital evaluation framework**

This evaluation drew on social capital evaluation framework (SCEF) that was developed by STARTTS in partnership with UNSW (Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Doney, 2013 and 2016). Social capital is defined as social relationships, connections, networks, and resources that exist within a community, as well as the 'norms' or formal and informal rules found in these relationships, such as trust and cooperation (Rostila, 2010). Social capital assists cooperation within and between communities. It is sometimes understood as a collective resource which can increase a community's capacity to address problems together and enhance community wellbeing (Putnam, 2000).

According to the SCEF, there are three categories of social capital objectives. These social capital objectives include a) social connection and network (SCN), b) social capital relational norms (SCRN) and c) social capital enablers (SCE). The first two relate to aspects of social capital including connections, networks, and trust. The last one relates to capacities needed to access existing and/or expanding social capital. There are three kinds of enablers including a) individual capacities, b) community capacities, and c) socio-political capacities. A series of indicators are associated with each category of social capital objectives. See Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Doney (2013) for the full list of indicators.

Facilitators were asked to reflect on how they felt and on what they observed and heard from their group members who participated in the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event. The following questions formed the basis for discussion:

- How did you feel about the event? This question is about overall experience with the event.
- What aspects of the event did people enjoy?
- Did you observe members of your group meeting new people, talking to other people, making friends?
- Did you observe people talking to other people?
- Did you observe that people in your group were happier after the event?
- Did the event help with addressing social isolation?
- What needs to improve for next time?

## **Data collection and analysis**

The KiC Project Officer organized a Zoom group discussion. The focus group discussion was facilitated by one of STARTTS' Community Development Evaluation Officers (CDEO). The CDEO obtained verbal consent from the facilitators to record the discussion. Participants in the group discussion agreed that the discussion is recorded for the purposes of using the data for this report only. Once the report is written up, the recording and transcript will be deleted.

Data from the group discussion was explored for emerging themes.

## **The Focus group discussion**

Six KiC group facilitators and the Project Officer participated in the focus group discussion. The aim of the focus group discussion was to provide space for KiC facilitators and Project Officer to reflect on the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event and discuss feedback they obtained from their group members who participated in the event.



## IV. Results

### Overall appraisal of the event

KiC facilitators who participated in the focus group were asked to provide an overall assessment of the event. The question they responded to was “How did you feel about the event [overall sense of the event]?” Facilitators spoke about the joy participants at the event felt. Below are comments from three facilitators:

*It was really fantastic for my group and for me as well because it was the same platform with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India the same day. It was very good for my community. We really enjoyed it. (Facilitator 1)*

*Our group was very excited and enjoyed it although our New Year was gone because it was first week of March. Still, they enjoyed the event. (Facilitator 2)*

*For my group, they really enjoyed it. It was the first time for them. Some of them saw the exhibition for the first time. Also, they loved the showing the traditional cloth. They come at the front of everyone. They loved it. (Facilitator 3)*

In addition, event attendees expressed their appreciation of the event and the facilitators in WhatsApp messages. Below are examples from attendees posting on WhatsApp about the event.

*The Sri Lankan New year celebration and attendance by other nationalities was a true representation of Australia's multiculturalism. Hats off to the organizers for their devotion and hard work to make the event a grand success. The performers were unbelievable and only proved once again age is only a number.*

*Many thanks ... for organising the beautiful and successful programme. I enjoyed it thoroughly.*

*Thanks to other organisers behind the scenes. There should be more of these occasions to celebrate and participate in.*

*Thank[s] ... for inviting us to participate and enjoy the Sri Lankan New Year celebration. Loved to be part of it and had a great time. Look forward to more of such occasions in the coming.*

*Thank you ... for giving me an opportunity to attend the Sri Lankan new year celebration event. It was an amazing experience about Sri Lankan culture which I never had before. Looking forward to knowing about any other cultural & event in future also willing to spread my culture to others please.*

*It is entirely the effort and contribution of our team. They performed very well and collaboratively. They took care of the choreography and costumes themselves. I bow to their efforts and talent. 🙏*



From the above comments, participants had enjoyed the event.

## Aspects of the event most enjoyed

Facilitators discussed what participants in the event enjoyed most. Facilitators commented that:

*For my group like MC was my group member. After the event he wrote me a message. I can read the message for you all. He wrote, "The Sri Lankan new year celebration attended by the other nationalities was true representation of Australia's multiculturalism. Hats off to the organization for their devotion and hard work to make the event a grand success. The performers were unbelievable... (Facilitator 1)*

*First of all, they enjoyed the celebration of New Year because they celebrated differently from us. It was a new thing for them. It was a different culture and they got experience with different cultures. The second thing of interest for them was their cloth because they all put on traditional cloth. They were very excited to show it to the others. The big thing is every single thing was made by hand by themselves. That was the particular thing they liked. They also had a small exhibition at the back. They do it by hand and it is hard work. Everyone goes and see that. They say it is very beautiful. It was kind of empowering for them. (Facilitator 2)*

*Actually, some of my participants loved the food. [Laughter] They said it was very delicious. They took home to the children and ate the food together. (Facilitator 4)*

Participants enjoyed the performances, the cultural experience, the exhibition and the food. Some participants even felt empowered when the products they made by hand were on show.





## **Making new connections**

When the facilitators were asked, “Did you observe members of your group meeting new people, talking to other people, making friends?” they responded like this:

*Not really because all of them were sitting in one spot. We didn't have a chance to speak to other people. You are right, maybe next time we can think about that too. We didn't have enough room to speak to other people. People were coming and sitting with their own group. (Facilitator 6)*

*The other problem was language. Although some of them can speak a little bit of English, a lot of them didn't speak one word of English. The language barrier as well separates them from each other. They were just in the corner. (Facilitator 2)*

*It is the first time they were exposed to other people and many cultures under one roof. Next time when they see this, they would smile at each other. Next time they would talk, I guess. (Project Officer)*

The responses above focused on the factors that influenced the process of connecting with other people. These included how the space was arranged, language barriers and lack of familiarity with other cultures. These factors will be discussed further in the discussion section below.

Although facilitators did not observe connections being made, WhatsApp posts seem to suggest that participants felt a sense of solidarity with others through sharing culture. The WhatsApp posts below were from different event attendees.

*While attending the Sri Lankan new year along with several diverse communities, it reminded me, once again, that we are many but we are one.*

*One of the best ways of knowing others is to participate in a function to demonstrate the versatility of our cultural heritage/identity by sharing cultural preferences, exchanging views with each other and food.*

*Australia is the country which represents one of the best multicultural societies in the world. It stands out with the peaceful and harmonious relations with culturally and linguistically diverse people.*

Although the facilitators commented above that no connections were made, they also commented below that there were connections made with people from other groups and within the groups.

## **Talking to other people**

A follow up question from the above was whether the facilitators observed their group members talking to people from other groups. The following were the responses:

*Yeah! Especially for our group because we had a small exhibition at the corner. People came and talked about who made that, how they make it, do you want to sell it? They asked questions and they talked about that. There were a few people who came and talked. (Facilitator 2)*

*Personally, I observed in the lunchroom. Everyone mixed up with everyone. When they were serving food, language went out of the window. Again, when they finished the program, they were telling “good” like this [show gestures – thumbs up]. (Project Officer)*

Facilitators and the Project Officer observed people from different groups talking to each other. Although language was a barrier, they were able to find different ways of communicating including the use of signs and gestures.



## **The wellbeing question**

The following was the wellbeing question put to facilitators, “Did you observe that people in your group were happier after the event?” Below are the responses from the participants in the group discussion.

*My group members were very happy. After the program, many people sent me lots of messages. (Facilitator 4)*

*My group liked the food and everything. They really enjoyed even the Afghans who came and took phone number from them. One of my group members was in hospital so she sent her husband to attend the event. (Facilitator 2)*

*The event was fantastic. It was well planned. Everyone was enjoying. My Indian group thoroughly enjoyed. That is the feedback I got - Food, activity. It was a good integration program. That was good. They got to meet different community groups as well. It was showing STARTTS strengths as well and meeting all multicultural communities. It was fantastic, yeah. (Facilitator 7)*

*They just called me, and they said it was so nice. The performances were so good. The food was good. The venue was good because it was close to transport. So, access was good. Some people couldn't make it because they had something else. They were asking, 'can we do something like this for Indian Dwalli?' (Facilitator 7)*

Participant enjoyed the event as indicated in the opening of this section. Facilitators report that after the event their group members continued to talk about the joy they experienced participating in the event. Facilitators received phone calls and WhatsApp messages to let them know how they felt about the event – they were happy.



## **Social Isolation**

The focus group participants responded to the following question, “Did the event help with addressing social isolation?” Responses were diverse and included the following:

*Our group is already covering that part. There is a good opportunity for everyone to see other communities – what are they doing? What are their languages? What are their songs about? That kind of thing is a different avenue to see things. Otherwise, they don't have a chance to see these kinds of things. That day we found a lot. We saw 5-10 performances. We don't see those things before. That was so beautiful. Everyone came up with different beauty. It was so beautiful to see. (Facilitator 4)*

*Yes, normally the group is always looking forward to the meetings we hold. We do fortnightly meetings. They always look forward to that day. Like if I don't send message about meeting two days before, they keep following up, “Are we meeting? Are we meeting?” They really look forward to that day. Not only that, this platform gives them the opportunity to present their skills. Like you know, in my group people like to sing or some of them were like the worriers. They get the opportunity to express that and the stories and how they are going. It is also like a peer support for them. Not just like they come*

*to listen to others. Every time they take some message back and then we run activities like for the next session we give them some activities. So, they prepare for that and the next session. It gives them some learning and self-learning opportunities as well. When they see other groups, it motivates them. They like to come together because if we become too bilingual they don't like that. They like to move a step ahead and become multicultural as well. It looks like Australian unity for them. My group likes this program and they look forward to such program in the future. (Facilitator 7)*



*It was a good program. They socialized with each other. Also, with other communities and with other groups. They know a lot about the Indian program because our people are kind of related with it in their films and performance. They enjoyed it. It was a good opportunity for them to socialize. Also, the other thing was they were very happy because I am coming back to Auburn with them on the same bus with them. They gave me very good feedback. Some of them were new to each other. They introduced each other and had a good chat. They appreciated the opportunity while they have it because they are always at home – not very social. (Facilitator 2)*

*Many of them have never been to Toongabbie. Some of them said to me, “this is a different town in Australia.” Look at this town, different shops compared to other [places they are familiar with]. Ukrainians said, ‘what is this shop full of food?’ They don't know the food – brown food, everything is brown. (Project Officer)*

*It was definitely like Australia the country that represents one of the best multicultural societies in the world. For my group members something that stood out was peaceful and harmonious relations with culturally and linguistically diverse people. My people came and enjoyed. (Facilitator 2)*

*One thing that happened is that most of the food items were prepared by some of the seniors in the groups. So, they have never seen that their food is being eaten and enjoyed by others than their family members. They were so glad. One of the Tamil group members made all the Sri Lankan traditional*

*food. For the first time they are seeing that they were serving food to some people outside their community. They were so proud of themselves and happy. They said, “Oh they can eat our food, you know. I thought they would say something bad about the food. They sort of accepted us.” They feel so happy when people say “Nice!” and “How do you make it?” Indian people came and asked how they made that the sweet. The Ukrainian also asked about the food. (Project Officer)*

*A few in the group are new arrivals. They don't have family. They are not going anywhere. They enjoyed the event. They saw different cultures and performances. They liked it. They were really happy. (Facilitator 4)*

Event participants do not often have opportunities to socialize outside their immediate family. The event allowed them to socialize and engage with peers from diverse cultures and backgrounds. They were entertained. For some, the interactions during the event were empowering as they felt accepted and included beyond their usual small family circle.



## **Improvements for next time**

The focus group discussed several possible ways to improve similar events in the future. Comments included:

*We ended up with 220 people [almost double what was expected]. (Project Officer)*

*Everyone brought something beautiful. The performances were so beautiful. However, we need to focus next time on how many people were coming in and who was doing what. (Facilitator 6)*

*Everything was very good. It was beautiful and they enjoyed it. The only thing was that food arrived late. It was wonderful food. It was delicious food. There was nothing wrong but a little bit late. Next time we will ask them to bring food earlier and will pack it. There will be no rush, and no one would take more food. (Facilitator 2)*

*We didn't have a chance at the end to have an activity that enabled people to interact with each other. People don't know how to do that. Many multicultural people came together in place but I couldn't organize or do anything to encourage people to interact and mix. (Project Officer)*

Different group members made suggestions:

*Next time organize games to encourage people to interact – think of language and cultural barriers.*

- *Get people in a circle.*
- *Issue around managing who is coming – too many people just turned up.*
- *Taking more responsibility for cleaning and tidying up*
- *Papers, cards, small things lost*

The areas of improvement identified above include controlling the number of participants attending the event so that only those who have registered are allowed to attend the event, ensuring that food arrives on time, finding ways to encourage participants to interact with each other and facilitators taking more active roles in running the event.



## V. Discussion

The last section has conclusively demonstrated that the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event was a remarkable success from both the facilitators perspective and that of the participants. This section highlights some of the themes that have come through from the last section. These themes include:

- Meaningful experience,
- Factors influencing social connectedness,
- Enhanced wellbeing,
- Intercultural awareness,
- Empowerment.

The event seems to have achieved a range of social capital objectives. Social capital objectives achieved include:

Social Capital Objective	Social Capital Indicators	Quote example demonstrating objective achievement
<b>Social Connection and Network (SCN) Objectives</b>		
Objective 8 Established, Strengthened or Expanded connections to members of one's own immediate community.	8.2 Increased positive contact with other community members.	<i>Personally, I observed in the lunchroom. Everyone mixed up with everyone. When they were serving food, language went out of the window. Again, when they finished the program they were telling "good" like this [show gestures – thumbs up]. (Project Officer)</i>
	8.4 Increased trust in other community members	
	8.5 Increased opportunities to participate in religious events or activities.	

		<i>My Indian group thoroughly enjoyed. That is the feedback I got - Food, activity. It was a good integration program. That was good. They got to meet different community groups as well. (Facilitator 7)</i>
Objective 11 Established, Strengthened or Expanded connections with people from outside one's immediate community or locality.	11.1 Increased positive relationships with people outside your immediate community or locality.	<i>It was definitely like Australia the country that represents one of the best multicultural societies in the world. For my group members something that stood out was peaceful and harmonious relations with culturally and linguistically diverse people. My people came and enjoyed. (Facilitator 2)</i>
	11.2 Increased positive contact with people outside your immediate community or locality	
	11.3 Increased number of friends or contacts outside one's own community or locality	
	11.4 Increased trust in people outside your immediate community or locality	
		<i>Our group is already covering that part. There is a good opportunity for everyone to see other communities – what are they doing? What are their languages? What are their songs about? That kind of thing is a different avenue to see things. Otherwise, they don't have a chance to see these kinds of things. That day we found a lot. We saw 5-10 performances. We don't see those things before. That was so beautiful. Everyone came up with different beauty. It was so beautiful to see. (Facilitator 4)</i>
		<i>My group liked the food and everything. They really enjoyed even the Afghans who came and took phone number from them. (Facilitator 2)</i>
<b>Social capital relational norms (SCRN) objectives</b>		
Objective 5: Increased understanding and acceptance of diversity within the wider community	5.1 Increased understanding of other communities or social groups	<i>Thank you ... for giving me an opportunity to attend the Sri Lankan new year celebration event. It was an amazing experience about Sri Lankan culture which I never had before. Looking forward to know about any other cultural &amp; event in</i>
	5.2 Increased acceptance of people or communities	



	<p>who are different to oneself.</p>	<p><i>future also willing to spread my culture to others please. (WhatsApp post)</i></p> <p><i>Thank[s] ... for inviting us to participate and enjoy the Sri Lankan New Year celebration. Loved to be part of it and had a great time. Look forward to more of such occasions in the coming. (WhatsApp post)</i></p>
	<p>5.3 Increased sense of being accepted and understood by people who are different to oneself.</p>	
<p><b>Social capital enablers (SCE) Objectives</b></p>		
<p>Objective 11: Increased cultural self-esteem – individual capacities.</p>	<p>11.1 Increased confidence in one's own community's strengths, competence and abilities.</p>	<p><i>Yes, normally the group is always looking forward to the meetings we hold. We do fortnightly meetings. They always look forward to that day. Like if I don't send message about meeting two days before, they keep following up, "Are we meeting? Are we meeting?" They really look forward for that day. Not only that, this platform gives them the opportunity to present their skills. Like you know in my group people like to sing or some of them were like the worriers. They get the opportunity to express that and the stories and how they are going. It is also like a peer support for them. Not just like they come to listen to others.</i></p> <p><i>For my group, they really enjoyed it. It was the first time for them. Some of them saw the exhibition for the first time. Also, they loved the showing the traditional cloth. They come at the front of everyone. They loved it. (Facilitator 3)</i></p> <p><i>The second thing of interest for them was their cloth because they all put on traditional cloth. They were very excited to show it to the others. The big thing is every single thing was made by hand by themselves. That was the particular</i></p>
	<p>11.2 Increased sense of pride in one's community and culture.</p>	
	<p>11.3 Increased opportunities to maintain culture and language.</p>	

		<p><i>thing they liked. They also had a small exhibition at the back. They do it by hand and it is hard work. Everyone go and see that. They say it is very beautiful. It was kind of empowering for them. (Facilitator 2)</i></p> <p><i>One thing that happened is that most of the food items were prepared by some of the seniors in the groups. So, they have never seen that their food is being eaten and enjoyed by others than their family members. They were so glad. One of the Tamil group members made all the Sri Lankan traditional food. For the first time they are seeing that they were serving food to some people outside their community. They were so proud of themselves and happy. They said, "Oh they can eat our food, you know. I thought they would say something bad about the food. They sort of accepted us." They feel so happy when people say "Nice!" and "How do you make it?" Indian people came and asked how they made that the sweet. The Ukrainian also asked about the food. (Project Officer)</i></p>
<p>Objective 12: Increased cultural capital – community capacities.</p>	<p>12.1 Increased opportunities to maintain community cultural practices (e.g., festivals and religious events)</p>	<p><i>One of the best ways of knowing others is to participate in a function to demonstrate the versatility of our cultural heritage/identity by sharing cultural preferences, exchanging views with each other and food.</i></p>
	<p>12.2 Increased opportunities to maintain and develop traditional community knowledge and skills (e.g., literature, art, music, medicine)</p>	<p><i>Yeah! Especially for our group because we had a small exhibition at the corner. People came and talked about who made that, how they make it, do you want to sell it? They asked questions and they talked about that. There were a few people who came and talked. (Facilitator 2)</i></p>

Objective 15: Increased respect for and acceptance of diverse cultures – community capacities	15.1 Decreased experience or perception of racism, gender, and other forms of discrimination	<p><i>The Sri Lankan New year celebration and attendance by other nationalities was a true representation of Australia's multiculturalism. Hats off to the organizers for their devotion and hard work to make the event a grand success. The performers were unbelievable and only proved once again age is only a number. (WhatsApp post)</i></p> <p><i>While attending the Sri Lankan new year along with several diverse communities, it reminded me, once again, that we are many, but we are one. (WhatsApp post)</i></p> <p><i>It was definitely like Australia the country that represents one of the best multicultural societies in the world. For my group members something that stood out was peaceful and harmonious relations with culturally and linguistically diverse people. My people came and enjoyed. (Facilitator 2)</i></p>
	15.2 Increased experience of interest in one's culture by others.	
	15.4 Increased sense of being accepted and understood by people who are different to oneself.	

## Meaningful experience

The aim of the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event was to engage KiC participants in a meaningful activity that they help plan and implement. The event was meaningful to KiC participants because it met their physical, social, and emotional wellbeing needs. Facilitators and participants expressed the joy they experienced during the event.

The specific aspects of the event that were most meaningful included:

- KiC participants experienced cultural diversity in a more meaningful and personal way (more on this under the intercultural awareness theme). (SCN 8.2, 8.4 and 8.5; 11.1 – 11.4; SCRN 5.1 – 5.3; SCE 11.1 – 11.3; and 15.1, 15.2, 15.4)
- Participants showcased their culture through singing, dancing and through food. (SCRN 5.1 – 5.3; SCE 12.1 – 12.2; and 15.1, 15.2, 15.4)
- Participants had new experiences, e.g., organizing an exhibition. Also, experiencing different ways of celebrating new year events.
- Socializing with peers from diverse backgrounds. (SCN 8.2, 8.4, 11.1 – 11.4; SCRN 5.1 – 5.3; and SCE 15.4)

Participants suggested that similar events be organized more frequently. In fact, during the focus group discussion with facilitators, a request was made to organize an Indian Diwali Event. Whether this request is granted is dependent on finding extra funds.

As presented above, those aspects of the event that were meaningful to participants were also social capital objectives that were achieved.



## Factors influencing social connectedness

When KiC facilitators were asked, “Did you observe members of your group meeting new people, talking to other people, making friends?”, they reflected on the factors that hindered the possibility of establishing social connections during the event. These factors included:

- The space where the event was taking place,
- Difficulties communicating due to lack of common language,
- Prior experience with or exposure to unfamiliar cultures.

Facilitators discussed how the seating arrangements during the event did not encourage social interaction across the various groups. Members of each group sat together during the event. The event was jam packed with activities some of which were not planned beforehand. Also, the event was oversubscribed. Consequently, it was challenging for the event organizers to make time for activities that facilitated any meaningful interaction during the formal part of the event.

Lack of common language made it difficult to have meaningful connection with others. Facilitators during the focus group discussion noted that while some participants could speak limited English, many did not speak English at all. However, when facilitators were asked whether they observed their group members talking to members of other groups, they said they did observe their group members talk to others. There were two instances where communication was observed. Firstly, the exhibition put up at the back of the room provided an opportunity for participants to talk to those running the exhibition. Members from various groups came up to the

Afghan exhibition and asked questions about the items on display. The second instance was in relation to food. Participants appreciated the food. They were also curious about how the Sri Lankan dishes on offer were prepared. Participants were observed to use different ways of communicating including talking, using commonly understood signs and gestures.

Another factor that played a role in hindering social interaction between groups at the event was lack of familiarity or exposure to each other's cultures. Although at the end of the event participants learnt much more about each other's cultures, it was challenging for many participants to engage socially across cultures.

## Enhanced wellbeing

WhatsApp messages presented above suggest that participants across KiC groups had positive experience at the Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event. As pointed out already, participants had meaningful experience. Participants and facilitators pointed out that they experienced the event as an example of Australia's successful multiculturalism. They felt that their participation with peers from across cultures was contributing to interculturalism, social harmony and cohesion.

Although it is difficult to say how exactly the event enhanced the wellbeing of participants, it was clear that participants felt that they had experienced physical, social, and cultural benefits that would have contributed to enhancing their wellbeing momentarily. It is certain that the event got them out of their usual isolated spaces. They experienced new things. The joy and excitement expressed by participants and facilitators certainly enhanced the wellbeing of all participants.



## Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural awareness is about appreciating and understanding one's own culture and other cultures. Facilitators in the group discussion and messages from participants seem to suggest that the Sri Lankan New Year event had improved intercultural awareness. Participants were exposed to cultures other than their own through performances, food and exhibition. They experienced one way of celebrating

new year events. There was much sharing of culture and of language. Some participants, although live in the most culturally diverse parts of Sydney and Australia, never had such a close and personal experience with other cultures. The event was described by participants as a show of Australian multicultural society. One participant noted that they were reminded that 'we are many but one.'

Some participants were in Toongabbie, where the event took place, for the first time. As they walked along the shopping precinct in Toongabbie, they saw a range of products with which they were not familiar. One participant in the focus group discussion reflected on what they heard during the even – 'everything in the shops was brown!' Such experiences, hopefully, enabled participants to realize that cultural diversity is real and there is much to learn. Participants were already anticipating another intercultural interaction soon to further their understanding of different cultures and cultural practices.

## **Empowerment**

The Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event was an opportunity for participants to share their cultural practices. Showcasing culture was empowering for participants. One of the facilitators discussed how the Afghan women worked so hard to produce materials for the exhibition. These Afghan women felt empowered as they walked on the stage showing the dresses they made by hand. They felt validated, according to one facilitator, when people from other cultural groups came up to them to ask about how they made the materials on display.

Another cited example where participants felt empowered was the food. Participants enjoyed Sri Lankan food that was on offer. Sri Lankan participants prepared food for the event. The Sri Lankan women who prepared food for the event felt validated when other participants from other cultures appreciated the food. Participants who were not from Sri Lanka wanted to know how such delicious food was prepared.

At the event, participants enjoyed performances from a diverse range of cultures. Performances including dance, singing, reciting poetry and speeches allowed participants to experience those cultures. Such cultural exposure is important for participants who rarely experience Australia beyond their family. For those who showcased their culture, the experience was affirming of their identity and positive contribution their cultures make.



## VI. Conclusion

The Sri Lankan New Year Celebration event was a success. It offered participants meaningful experience. Participants' meaningful experience is reflected in the range of social capital objectives achieved. These include increasing social connection and network (SCN 8.2 – 8.5, 11.1 – 11.4); Social capital relational norms (SCRN 5.1 – 5.3); and social capital enablers (SCE 11.1 – 11.3, 12.1 – 12.2, 15.1, 15.2, 15.4).

Participants enjoyed the event, shared culture, and learnt about other cultures. They felt empowered, more connected, and happier as a result of participating in the event. There is now expectation among KiC participants that each cultural group would be given an opportunity to celebrate their culture with others in the same way the Sri Lankan community has done.

Areas for event improvement were identified. These include ensuring that there is enough time for groups to interact with each other, that food arrives on time and that only those who register attend.



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