

Civic Participation in times of crisis: what we can learn from followers, “unofficial leaders” and undocumented humanity in South West Sydney

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 disproportionately affected migrant and refugee communities in Australia, highlighting outdated communication practices. Despite social media's potential for two-way communication, current health messaging remains top-down. Community leaders are often utilized as message amplifiers, neglecting their ability to create engaging content section.

2. Objectives /Methods

This research explores the multifaceted nature of civic engagement within CALD communities, moving beyond traditional notions of volunteerism. Drawing on **three case studies**, the paper highlights the varied forms of civic practices undertaken by CALD communities, including advocacy, community leadership, and cultural preservation. to explain what your research project set out to achieve. Clearly state the research question or hypothesis.

3. Example of case study (one of three)

Jaithoon Venkateshwar

Jaithoon, a second-generation Fiji-born Indian, transitioned from a 20-year corporate career to become a passionate community advocate. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she recognized the urgent need for culturally relevant information and support within her community. She proactively established the "Sab Sahelia" Facebook group, providing vital COVID-19 updates in Hindi and addressing the unique challenges faced by the Fijian Indian community. Additionally, she joined the Pacific Collective, further extending her reach and impact. Jaithoon's tireless efforts also included navigating complex regulations, assisting with domestic violence cases, and organizing online and offline activities to foster connection and well-being. Notably, she led a charity walk raising an impressive \$35,000 for the Mito (Mitochondria) Foundation.

3. Key insights from case studies

- Social media empowers new forms of civic participation, especially in crises, enabling individuals to take initiative and cross from private to public spheres.
 - This research challenges traditional views of civic participation and volunteering, highlighting the rise of "creative participation" among marginalized groups.
 - The study questions the use of fixed identities like "community leader," advocating for recognition of diverse roles like champions and influencers.
 - Data collection and reporting on volunteering needs revision, demanding flexible and creative ways to support and empower citizens working towards shared goals.
 - Current policies overlook informal volunteering and civic participation, particularly among migrant and refugee communities, leading to inadequate funding and limited evidence for future interventions.
- Piloting mentorship programs and collaborative spaces can foster mutual benefits and potential career opportunities for informal leaders.



Above left: Jaithoon, Venkateshwar (standing, second from left) Sab Sahelia group raising \$12,000 for Coastrek and earlier raising \$35,000 for Mito (Mitochondria) Foundation.
Above right: Mani Sidara (2nd case study) from the Lao community spent \$4,000 of her own money on video equipment to provide daily COVID updates to her community. She has since been awarded the Governor General's medal.

Note: There are three case studies involved in this research: Jaithoon Venkateshwar, Mani Sidara and Associate Professor Ahmad Alrubaie OAM who worked with Arabic speakers and addressed misinformation. Due to space limitations this poster has featured one of the three case studies.

5. Conclusion

The case studies in this research highlight the evolving nature of civic participation, particularly in the context of crises. It showcases how individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities utilized social media to address unmet needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their stories emphasize the importance of **flexible engagement models** and **challenge traditional notions of volunteering and civic participation**. The paper advocates **for recognizing and supporting the agency of community members**, emphasizing the need for collaboration **and real-time communication between government institutions and grassroots leaders**. It concludes by urging a shift towards participatory approaches that leverage community insights and expertise, moving beyond top-down communication models.

Positionality statement

As a migrant and local resident of South Western Sydney with over 25 years of experience in Health Promotion and Health Communication, my positionality significantly shapes this research. I've witnessed how factors like community size and English proficiency impact resource allocation, often leaving smaller, emerging language groups underserved. My lived experience and professional background drive my commitment to exploring how individuals bridge these gaps. This research underscores the urgent need to support informal volunteers, foster collaboration, and prioritize real-time, culturally responsive communication, especially during crises. While acknowledging the value of rigorous research, I question how institutions can adapt to facilitate real-time impact. I recognize the complexities of diverse migrant experiences and the potential for valuable insights from both local and international communities.

Contact details and/ or to receive a copy of a forthcoming manuscript containing all case studies

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