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<th><strong>Project title</strong></th>
<th>Bridges for African Men and Families</th>
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<td><strong>Project practice</strong></td>
<td>Building service/client relationships and improving service responsiveness to meet the relationships needs of African Tasmanian communities</td>
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<td><strong>Project undertaken by</strong></td>
<td>Relationships Australia, New Town (Hobart), Tasmania</td>
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<td><strong>Start date</strong></td>
<td>July 2006</td>
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<td><strong>Focal areas</strong></td>
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| **Issue** | For people coming to live here from African countries, there can be a division between roles at home and expectations of Australian life. This is reflected in the roles of adult men and women, and young people, who are faced with the tensions between maintaining traditional African cultural practices while adhering to the demands of a new society. This creates challenges for maintaining and enhancing relationships.

From discussions had in working and socialising with people from African countries and hearing their concerns, it became clear that one of the underlying difficulties is the culture shock experienced – particularly by African men. Their position in the family as the provider is often shaken by the changes that occur in Australian society that impact the family structure. For example, their wives often gain a degree of independence and individual status through receiving Centrelink benefits and having their own bank cards. This is a critical issue and can lead to problems of male alcohol abuse and domestic violence.

The other crucial relationship issue that emerged from monthly dialogue meetings was the differing levels of adaptation to Australian society between parents and their children. Young people can adapt more quickly to a new country, though they often have misconceptions of how it is for other young people in this society, which can lead to social problems with cultural integration.

Also there are concerns of how to parent in a new country, with people trying to understand the law and the values underpinning parental practices in Australia. |
**Program context**

Relationships Australia Tasmania (RA Tasmania) is a community-based, non-denominational, not for profit organisation that provides a wide range of counselling, mediation, community and educational services for individuals, couples and families on relationship and other issues. RA Tasmania also provides support and information specifically for men, as well as range of community development activities, exploring ways of offering support to Aboriginal communities and to other Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities.

RA Tasmania applied for funding to explore the issues identified in African Tasmanian communities. The project funding from FaHCSIA provided a starting point. The program is presently continuing unfunded as RA Tasmania is committed to working with African Australians.

**Practice description**

The Bridges for African Men and Families Program is based on monthly dialogue meetings with representatives from CALD African communities in Tasmania, and other relevant service providers. The meetings explore how to disseminate useful information and support on healthy relationships and to enable relevant service providers to be more responsive to the needs of these communities. Monthly dialogue meetings have occurred over a period of two years.

The program’s objectives have been to:

- enhance the understanding of service providers about the issues faced by new-arrival African Tasmanian communities in order to develop programs to address needs, and/or promote service coordination and liaison amongst agencies delivering services to African communities; and
- provide knowledge to this target group of support services and how to access them, as well as to encourage access to support for personal relationship difficulties arising out of cultural and integration issues in Australian society.

In order to achieve these objectives, 15–25 participants, including approximately 10 from African Tasmanian communities, meet each month to discuss relevant issues. Meetings are held at RA Tasmania because the services provided by the agency are relevant to the discussions that take place, and it allows participants to become familiar with the organisation.

The meetings usually run for 2-hours and are generally chaired by RA Tasmania staff associated with the Bridges Project. The meetings are called “dialogue” meetings because the emphasis is on the two-way exchange of information and issues. The meeting is run in a flexible and relaxed manner to allow open discussion of key issues. If there is time, updates from service providers may be addressed. It is regarded as very important to gain the views of the African Australians present, with time and space allowed to encourage their participation in discussion.

The following key ingredients have been fundamental to the effectiveness of the monthly dialogue meetings.

**Identifying and recruiting participants through mixed approaches**

Meeting attendees are from hard to reach populations and therefore various approaches are required to gain their support. There are three key methods for identifying and successfully recruiting participants from both African Australian and other service providers. These are:

1. building on personal networks with African Tasmanians;
2. targeting appropriate service provider agencies; and
3. encouraging the involvement of participants from other community meetings.
1. Building on personal networks with African Tasmanians

The Community Development Officer of RA Tasmania drew on personal connections and engagement in other community programs. These included personal friends within African Australian communities, and the Bi-Cultural Community Health Workers (BCHW). Through this method, the Community Development Officer sought assistance in identifying key people from both the service sector and the local communities, inviting them to be a part of the program.

Initially, it was difficult to identify who were the particular leaders or gatekeepers of local communities as community associations were only just beginning to form. The main participants from African Tasmanian communities became Bi-Cultural Health Workers as they were taking on leadership type positions in their role of talking to communities about health issues. Further participants have gradually been identified and approached by those already attending the meetings. This snowballing approach, where membership builds through ongoing invitation of new members by existing members, has proven to be effective.

If the African Tasmanians in the meetings are not attached to a service provider (and therefore attending as part of their work), they are paid an attendance fee. Payment was seen as vital in making sure that people were able to get to the meetings and be reimbursed.

2. Targeting appropriate service provider agencies

RA Tasmania has links with a broad range of agencies through all its various programs. Also the Community Development Officer at RA Tasmania has developed networks with various service providers. Other agencies were invited to attend monthly dialogue meetings when particular relationship issues were identified for discussion at the meetings and those agencies were seen as having expertise in that area.

3. Encouraging the involvement of participants from other community meetings

Community meetings had been run with the Burundian community by one service provider and with the involvement of the Bridges Community Development Worker. This has since evolved into semi-regular meetings with the RA Tas counsellor and Community Development Officer for about a year. Two people from this community joined the monthly dialogue sessions as one result of support meetings with that community. These were people who had developed leadership roles in their community and who had greater English language capability.

Establishing effective linkages with other community services

Linking up with other community services served a 4-pronged purpose:

1. Facilitated information sharing between service providers and the communities

The education dialogue sessions/meetings have been noted as the only extended opportunity for dialogue with key African community members in Tasmania. As a result of these dialogue meetings, service providers have run programs based on discussions with the community representative at these meetings.

Information sharing through meetings allows service providers the opportunity to talk about their programs and how their service can be in a position to assist African Tasmanians. However, a more integral aspect of this information sharing is the provision of dialogue opportunities to talk about relevant issues faced by African communities; especially relationship issues, and seeking strategies and solutions to these issues. Service providers view these meetings as an opportunity to learn more about pressing issues within the communities and how they can better offer their services.
2. Tapping into community expertise

During the sessions, as particular issues were discussed, service providers were invited as guest presenters on such topics as: sexual health, family planning, drugs, and alcohol addiction. Through dialogue with community representatives/leaders, service providers became more aware how to promote their services to meet the needs of communities. In turn, those attending from African Tasmanian communities now have more knowledge and idea of how to talk about these issues – some of which have previously been taboo subjects. The process also acknowledges the expertise and knowledge that African Australians bring to the meetings.

3. Opening up the opportunity for inter-agency collaborative work

The opening up of opportunity for inter-agency collaborative work happens in an informal and casual manner through the conversations before, during and after the meetings. Examples include:

• The representative from Glenorchy City Council (GCC) was able to gain more knowledge and insight through the dialogue meetings, and has identified potential participants from the meetings for their Living in Harmony Program.

• The Forum for African Australians—Strengthening Families in a New Country. This was held in November 2007, comprising 200 participants and included service provider involvement. The Forum was funded by RA Tasmania with Colony 47 (which runs a settlement service for young people as well as other social services), and was organised by a steering committee comprising members from the dialogue meetings. The Forum included interpreters (from the communities) for four languages to facilitate the running of the Forum. The issues discussed at the Forum focused on parent/child and spousal family relationships.

4. Expansion of personal networks and information sharing among the various communities

The meetings have also provided an excellent opportunity for people from different African communities to find out more about each other, therefore finding common ground amongst African national and cultural diversity. Attendance at the meetings has now grown with a representative from most of the African communities – Sudan, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia/Eritrea, Rwanda and Congo. The sessions have been conducted in English but an opportunity later arose to reach a greater number of people by using interpreters. The previously mentioned Forum meeting has added to the expansion of personal networks and information sharing.

Development of fact sheets for community service providers

One-page fact sheets are designed for people working with African Tasmanians.

Through initial project funding, the dialogue meetings addressed nine relationship topics. From these discussions, fact sheets were developed which outlined some of the main difficulties individuals and communities may face, and provided contact details of the appropriate service agencies. The fact sheets are seen to be useful in giving a snapshot of a relationship issue that can be easily understood and can therefore be distributed and discussed amongst community members. They include issues such as counselling, marriage and separation support, family violence and sexual health.

The fact sheets have been effective in ensuring service agencies take into consideration cultural perspectives in adapting their programs to be more responsive to the various community values. For example, in the fact sheet about mediation the following is stated:

It is known that in many African countries mediation is often dealt with through elders in the community. RA Tas recognises this approach and is willing to incorporate it in our mediation practice.
The dialogue meetings also resulted in Guidelines for Service Providers. These guidelines are seen as useful as they contain comments from many of the discussions held, enabling further insights for service providers as to how to be more responsive to the needs of communities. They have been circulated amongst service providers as widely as possible. To further promote this information, a launch of the guidelines and fact sheets was held with local ABC radio and Southern Cross TV coverage.

**Engagement of an African Community Development worker**

An African Australian, who is a trainee staff member at the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) and a member of the monthly dialogue meetings, has been employed one day per week between MRC and RA Tasmania. Their role is to assist RA Tasmania in its support of African Tasmanian communities. This is another aspect of RA Tasmania furthering its strategy of reaching out to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities, and is important as a symbol of the African partnership in assisting in leadership of dialogues. This worker has helped with the African men’s group, both in encouraging men to attend and in helping to facilitate. This in turn has enhanced his leadership and mentoring skills. He also assisted in the organising of the Forum: Strengthening Families in a New Country.

**Research base**

African migrants comprise a significant proportion of those resettling in Australia under humanitarian and refugee programs (African Think Tank, 2006). Since 1998, the number of visas granted to people from Africa for resettlement under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program has increased from 1,552 in 1998–99 to 8,353 in 2003–04 (Department of Community Development, WA, 2005). Between 2003 and 2004, the percentage of humanitarian arrivals to Australia born in sub-Saharan Africa increased from 51.4% to 70.4% (Department of Community Development, WA, 2005).

There is an emerging literature on issues facing African communities re-settling in Australia. This literature highlights similar issues to those identified at the beginning of this program. A recent major workshop of African communities held in Victoria in 2006, identified that:

Many families experience “culture shock” on their arrival in Australia and, without appropriate support, find it difficult to understand and adapt to mainstream Australian values and norms. Cultural differences increase pressures on families and communities, and have serious implications for refugees’ ongoing physical and psychological wellbeing and for their engagement with other Australians and mainstream institutions. (African Think Tank, 2006, p. 3)

The Victorian workshop identified a range of issues but focused on many to do with family, relationship and changing roles. In addition, the workshop identified issues regarding the need for ongoing community education (not just immediately after arrival), the need to enhance community consultation with African communities, and the need to incorporate cultural practices within relevant service responses, such as those to do with counselling or domestic violence (African Think Tank, 2006).

The Victorian experience, echoed that of earlier research conducted in Tasmania (Juma, 2005). Juma’s paper confirmed the information that had been given before the beginning of the project. It reaffirmed the experiences of people in experiencing culture shock through the changes in gender roles that are thrust upon people straightaway through the systems in Australia (e.g., women able to access their own money through Centrelink, and being able to have their own bankcard). The paper explores how a number of Sudanese men cope with settlement, how they deal with conflict and communication issues. It provided information for needs analysis, emphasising the need for relationship issues to be discussed in the manner in which the dialogue meetings have taken place.

Similarly, a community forum of African communities in WA in 2005 identified the same range of issues as both the Victorian and Tasmanian experiences discussed.
above. As with the Victorian documentation, the WA forum report (Department of Community Development WA, 2005) identifies strategies focusing on cultural education for mainstream services, involvement of African community leaders in service provision, and culturally appropriate information about available services to overcome the lack of knowledge about these services among African communities.

Two examples of consultation and discussion between African communities and Australian community service providers and government are documented in the literature. The first of these was discussed briefly above, ie the Victorian African-Australian Community's Initiative Workshop held in 2006. The literature on this event records a high level of African participation, fostered largely through advertising in African media. However, little documentation is provided about the other processes that supported this event. Of a more longer-term nature was the development of the African Communities Family Support and Domestic Violence Planning Group in Western Australia in 2004 (Department of Community Development WA, 2005). This group operated with similar objectives to that of the Tasmanian dialogue meetings, with a focus on educating mainstream service providers towards more appropriate service delivery, and the provision of information and supports to African families. The literature available provides documentation of the outcomes of a single forum on domestic violence held by the group in 2004 rather than the processes of the ongoing planning group. The Department of Community Development WA (2005) reports that a significant factor in the success of the community forum was the involvement of a paid project officer who was a member of the African community. This project officer played a strong role in participant recruitment, and a process of snowball recruitment of forum participants was also used. The report documents the importance of inviting both formal leaders of communities and those with less formal roles, as well as seeking a gender balance of participants.

Other literature and resources have identified more specific information about topics of concern for African communities in Australia. This includes specific information on issues such as domestic violence (Department of Community Development WA, 2005), parenting (Schmidt, 2005), and marriage and separation (Makeny, n.d). These resources provided a base for both discussions as well as informing later Fact Sheets. For example, the Makeny film examines domestic violence and the experience of African migration. It explores the change to a new country for an African couple and the separation that occurs. This film provided a useful starting point for the group to discuss partnership/marriage and separation issues. There was much in the film that spoke to people's experiences including the initial cultural divide and shock that many feel.

### Outcomes

Though the dialogue meetings represent an emerging practice, four outcomes are discussed below:

- increased service responsiveness/relevance;
- increased knowledge and awareness of African issues;
- increased linked-up services and service planning/coordination; and
- emerging relationships between African groups and services.

### Evidence of outcomes

To date there has been no rigorous evidence gathered to enable a substantial data base to evaluate outcomes. The information to evidence outcomes is drawn largely from a collation of comments and service examples generated within the monthly dialogue meetings, and some correspondence surrounding meetings (such as emails). These have indicated the success of the program to date and provide a useful starting point to evaluate program outcomes.

#### Dialogue meetings

These meetings have been carefully transcribed and data are available for analysis. Feedback sheets have also been completed by participants.
**Surveys**

Two surveys were given to members of the dialogue group. The surveys sought information on member understandings of the project, as well as its impacts on project groups/individuals. The surveys provide evidence of the value of the group, but also identify that the program is still in its formative stages with its full impact yet to be realised.

The Forum, *Strengthening Families in a New Country*, has been another strategy from the dialogue meetings in how information and support can be disseminated to communities. Further evaluation and follow up is currently underway, with the meetings providing a central role in collation of this data.

The evidence evaluated demonstrates early results in some areas, but is unable to provide conclusive data given that the project is felt to require a longer operating period. However the data suggests that the practice is achieving outcomes even at this early stage, as discussed below.

**Increased service responsiveness/relevance**

Service providers have gained useful information and deeper understanding on a number of issues. Comments from dialogue meeting feedback sheets identify changes in services as a result of dialogue meetings. These changes include:

- increased cultural competence as evidenced in their improved discussions during meetings;
- increased networking between service providers; and
- direct translation into specific local government projects.

This in turn has influenced service providers’ service delivery to communities with services changing in response to issues identified through dialogue meetings. For example, one meeting participant, the representative from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), commented that:

> The needs identified have … been provided to DIAC’s national settlement needs database. This assists in identifying priorities, which in turn informs the grants allocation process.

Another participant from the Humanitarian Entrants section of Catholic Education noted that:

> As the representative for the Catholic Education system in Tasmania, the CALD Bridges dialogue sessions have informed me on current issues facing the African Tasmanian community. Information from within the community and service providers that they want publicised is now able to happen. Informing the community and service providers on the realities of the Catholic Education sector and what is happening with African Tasmanians in schools is, I feel, essential for all sectors to be able to work collaboratively to improve the settlement and educational outcomes for African Tasmanians.

Other participants had more general comments about the role of the Bridges program:

> What the sector is struggling with is how we get information to new arrivals in timely and accessible ways. We’re still struggling with this and this is what the project should continue to focus on. (Representative, Colony 47)

> Due to changes in roles, values, laws and other life styles most African families are struggling and finding it hard to settle in their new country and also fit in to a new society and culture. This project supports communities to understand the new system but also encourages them to keep the
positive cultural practices and values. Projects such as Bridges can play a big role in bridging the gap between service providers and communities and allowing them to have a closer look at their issues and work together towards a positive outcome. (Migrant/Refugee Liaison Officer, Royal Hobart Hospital)

Increased knowledge and awareness of African issues

There are three areas in which increased knowledge and awareness of African issues are apparent:

1. An increase of knowledge and awareness about each other among African Tasmanians within the dialogue group.

Among the feedback comments provided, one person identified the benefits of having representation from Burundians, Rawandese, Sudanese. Another African Tasmanian participant reflected:

   I personally believe there are many individuals who have benefited from this project. Generally, the project had great impact on the African community in sharing the issues and in understanding the Australian Cultural values. (Representative Sudanese Association and Migrant Resource Centre, Hobart)

2. An increase in knowledge and awareness among a wider circle of African Tasmanians as a result of the knowledge being disseminated by African members of the dialogue group.

   An increase in activities targeting African communities indicates a greater sharing of knowledge and information. Members of African communities who attended sessions have been able to disseminate information to others in communities about various issues, including speaking to a Sudanese Association on sexual health issues.

   Additionally, members of African Tasmanian communities have joined other Tasmanian men on a men’s group (Tassiemale program of RA Tasmania—a 6-week course). A group specifically for African men has been run for fourteen weeks (with an Arabic interpreter) now transitioning to support in the wider community. Another African men’s group will begin soon with interpreter support in Swahili.

3. An increase in knowledge and awareness about African issues by non African members of the dialogue group and their service agencies.

   The feedback sheets collected from dialogue meetings provide nine comments discussing the role of the meeting in informing non African participants. They indicate a valuing of this “wonderful opportunity to hear the views of the African community”. Another rated it the “Best forum I attend to hear from African people and they seem empowered to share”. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) representative noted:

   From a DIAC perspective, the project is a great way to hear issues facing the communities from both a service provider and individual, community perspective at the same time. The topic discussions have been great.

Increased linked up services and service planning/coordination

Two dialogue meeting members commented on the value of the group as a means to achieve service co-ordination. One commented:

   In an environment where there are now a large variety of service providers catering to the target population, the opportunity to network with other service providers is vital. Both client groups and providers benefit from the opportunity to exchange ideas and further develop effective and appropriate service strategies in relation to African communities.
It has been noted that this has been the only opportunity for ongoing dialogue with representatives of African Tasmanian communities on relationship issues and an opportunity for relevant service providers to meet together.

Dialogue meetings have resulted in service providers becoming either engaged for the first time or further engaging with members of African communities and in deepening their cross cultural understanding. Six service providers have become engaged for the first time with African communities, including *Employment Plus* (Salvation Army), Family Planning, Sexual Health and Alcohol and Drug Services (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS]), Catholic Education, Carers Tasmania, and *Holyoake*. A further 10 service providers have been involved in planning with African communities. These include: RA Tasmania, Hobart Family Relationship Centre, Colony 47, Department of Education, Catholic Education, *Steps* Employment, *Employment Plus* (Salvation Army), Migrant/Refugee Liaison (Royal Hobart Hospital), Centacare Tasmania, and Glenorchy City Council.

A significant number of service providers (13) have been involved in working with each other to coordinate or jointly plan services. These include RA Tasmania, Hobart Family Relationship Centre, Colony 47, Migrant Resource Centre South, Centacare Tasmania, Department of Education, Catholic Education, *Employment Plus* (Salvation Army), *Steps* Employment, Sexual Health services (DHHS), Carers Tasmania, Migrant/Refugee Liaison (Royal Hobart Hospital), and Glenorchy City Council.

**Emerging relationships between African groups and services**

One dialogue member identified that a key purpose of the meetings “is about creating the links between communities and service providers”. Several feedback comments speak of African Tasmanian participants gaining deeper knowledge of services as well as better shared understanding of relationship issues.

One example of this is the *Glenorchy City Council*, which has harnessed ideas and people from these meetings for a *Living in Harmony* project and other diversity activities. As described by a Council staff member:

> This project has provided the most useful, engaging, stimulating and relevant conversations happening in the settlement sector in Tasmania. – Representative, Community Development / Cultural Diversity section, Glenorchy City Council

**Policy analysis**

The project is a positive example of a place-based early intervention and prevention approach to child protection and development. It contributes to the emerging evidence base around service delivery appropriate to African communities resettling in Australia, and offers an innovative model of longer-term collaboration and dialogue between African community members and service providers.

**Evaluation**

An internal evaluation has been conducted by the project manager, using a service-user survey.

The project was submitted for consideration for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) Promising Practice Profiles (PPP). The project was assessed across a range of criteria relating to how the service results in positive outcomes for children, families and communities. The submission was peer reviewed and validated as evidencing promising practice. More information on the PPP selection process may be found at [http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/pppprocess.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/pppprocess.html)
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<th>Fact sheets on: healthy relationships; counselling; mediation (family dispute resolution); partnership/marriage and separation support; safe at home legislation; domestic/family violence; parenting and young people; sexual health; drugs and gambling issues.</th>
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Makeny, B. (Director) (no date). *Sweet pain* [Documentary]. (Available from Information & Cultural Exchange, contact (02) 9897 5744 or email info@ice.org.au)  
   
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| **Website** |                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| **More information** | More information on the Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website. |