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LIVERPOOL 
NEIGHBOURHOOD
CONNECTIONS

EVALUATION OF LIVERPOOL NEIGHBOURHOOD CONNECTIONS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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Research Summary for Media



Context of the Evaluation

The evaluation examined the effectiveness of the Liverpool Neighbourhood Connections Community Development Program (LNC-CDP) in helping “families in crisis”. The research was initiated by Western Sydney University and led by Professor Brian Stout and Dr Teddy Nagaddy in response to the government’s call for evidence-based community initiatives that alleviate economic and social exclusion among the most vulnerable populations in Australia. The overarching objective of the research/evaluation was to assess the impact of the CDP on women’s livelihood and the broader community within the Liverpool Local Government Area.

Liverpool is a suburb within Greater Western Sydney that has been disproportionately affected by poverty and social

exclusion, with women and children being affected the most. Currently, Liverpool is growing into a large multicultural city with a significant population of overseas born migrants, many of whom are socially and economically disadvantaged. According to the Australian Council of Social Service report (2018) on poverty in Australia, 1 in 8 people live below the poverty line, particularly sole parents, of whom women constitute the largest proportion. Gender and single parenthood were noted as risk factors to poverty and the report indicated that being born overseas in a non-English speaking country exacerbated the situation. It was estimated that 29.6 percent of people born overseas as compared to 8.4 per cent Australian-born, lived in poverty.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation utilised a qualitative approach underpinned by a realist perspective. This methodology explores complex systems and structures within which women’s income poverty and social exclusion are constructed. Through a phased approach, the first set of semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight LNC program managers. This was relevant in developing a Theory of

Change (TOC) model and identifying fundamental agency values that inform policies and activities. The second set of interviews were conducted with 20 program beneficiaries to assess their experiences of the program. The women’s stories were important in testing the effectiveness of LNC’s Theory of Change.



LNC Priorities that have created an enabling environment

The Theory of Change model revealed several LNC priorities that have shaped the Agency's activities and the Community Development Policy, creating an enabling environment. These included:

- Focus on the empowerment of women through education and small-scale income generating activities eg working at social enterprises (ie businesses that have primarily social objectives and reinvest profits) has a multiplier effect. It positively impacts on the overall well-being of their families and the broader community. This is premised on the understanding women are more likely than men to be driven by social values to pursue economic goals.
- Gendered approach to poverty relief. Women were identified as the most affected by structural complexities, partly due to varying cultural values within which they are socialised over the life course. For example, in the context of LNC, it was reported that gender roles limit women's educational and employment opportunities. These families are not only at a risk of domestic violence, deprivation of basic needs but also child neglect – a situation in the context of LNC, that was reported as partially attributed to engagement in drug and substance abuse.
- Family stabilisation within migrant and refugee neighbourhoods is a tool central to initiatives seeking to socially and economically empower women. The evaluation demonstrated that creating healthier and financially secure families is a product of a gendered approach to family stabilisation through strategies that enable women to participate in meaningful educational and employment opportunities. This is underpinned by the assumption that women's problems reflect the complex nature of systems with which families interact, hence making them central to efforts of poverty alleviation.

- The TOC revealed that Agency collaboration with private and public organisations, as well as **community support within the neighbourhood**, increases acceptability of the program, access to resources necessary in creating education and employment opportunities and childcare. For instance, collaborative funding from government, the Sydney Community Foundation (NGO) and philanthropists have all been instrumental in providing monetary and non-monetary support. As with all projects, the services that LNC is able to provide is very much dependent on the funding it is able to attract.

Overall, the Liverpool Neighbourhood Connections TOC model of community development demonstrated that the Agency works in a context of 'families in crisis'. These are families trapped in structural conditions that expose them to income poverty, unequal power relations within their communities, vulnerabilities and lack of agency.

"If you help a woman, you employ a woman, the whole family will benefit, because the woman never takes for herself, she'll always take to give to her kids to better their life so that in the end it betters the whole family, not just her."

LNC Community Officer

Evaluation Findings

What works in the LNC Community Development Program

Most of the women who participated in the evaluation reported being migrants or refugees, who spoke English as a second language. The women reported not to have had any formal employment within Australia due to a lack of skills, language barriers and the focus on providing informal care to family members and their children

- Participants reported that providers carry out an **assessment** of a person's individual needs (mother and child), in a less intimidating environment. This includes assessing access to free childcare, and a simplified education enrolment process (including TAFE) with minimal paperwork

"...If you go to TAFE here, it's completely different to going to TAFE at the actual campus. The teachers are more understanding of the different people that we get because some of them, they've had a pretty rough life. So, it's good to be able to do TAFE here where they've got that warm environment."

– **Former LNC client, now staff**

"The teachers are more understanding of the different people that we get because some of them, they've had a pretty rough life."

Former LNC Client, now staff

It was observed that an assessment of an individual participant's needs in consideration of their significant others is pivotal to LNC activities. It is the 'definer' of where families are falling into the cracks of the complex systems and processes, and how these impact on families.

- Participants reported that **child support services** were a key incentive to their participation. Limited access to affordable childcare constrains mobility and engagement in work outside the home. Services for children (from free childcare, to homework help, to computer learning, to sports, to life-skills such as personal safety, healthy lifestyles, and anger management for girls and boys) break the cycle of poverty, illiteracy and nurture kids into responsible and resilient people.
- Some of the participants reported **enhanced skilling and employment opportunities**

"...the environment is so good for the babies - I don't have to worry about my baby"

LNC Participant

"Like I said I, I am with the baby. for a mother staying at home it's very difficult to learn something because of kids. If I were staying at home I wouldn't have learnt the coffee thing, sandwich making and yoga and all that. But now as I have this caretaker (one member of LNC staff) she is an amazing lady; the environment is so good for the babies - I don't have to worry about my baby" – LNC participant

- Most participants reported that their engagement with LNC promoted **healthy relationships** between them and their children, as employment in social enterprises and education made them role models of good behaviour
- Most of the participants reported **enhanced social connectedness** and identity reconstruction through the women's club
- **Improved mental well-being** was reported by participants. They expressed being 'happy', 'confident' and with 'improved self-esteem', with no stress related to childcare were reported.
- While children directly benefited from the program, **women emerged as the primary beneficiaries** in the sense that they were able to engage in other activities that improved their life skills, incomes, social relations, mental health and overall family well-being.

"The area back then was uneducated, housing commission, third-generation unemployment, that's what it was, and these kids knew no different. They just knew that they 'don't have to finish school cause mum and dad, or their grandma didn't. We're gonna get housing because we're gonna stay in this house because it's grandma's house and now mum stayed in it, now it's ours'. That was the mentality. They didn't strive for anything, they strived for Centrelink and we wanted to change that."

– **LNC Operations Manager**

Programs are gender sensitive as women hold higher social and familial values than men, given their role as carers and helping children transit into Australian education.

"If you help a woman, you employ a woman, the whole family will benefit, because the woman never takes for herself, she'll always take to give to her kids to better their life so that in the end it betters the whole family, not just her." – LNC Community Officer

Conclusion and Ongoing Challenges

The LNCCDP has transformed the lives of migrant and refugee women and their families in the Liverpool neighbourhood. The childcare and child services program has been a fundamental enabler of women's labour participation and improved parenting skills, leading to happier families. This has not only empowered women to live as financially independent individuals, but it has also proved to have the potential of reducing welfare dependency and promotion of mental wellness.

The challenges faced by the Centre all relate to funding and the limited capacity to extend both the volume of services and their nature and quality. The increasing population in the area has created pressure on LNC's limited services, both in offering services and in finding employment opportunities. Similarly, the lack of financial resources for facility expansion means that the need for child support services is not being met. This results both in some families not being offered the service and other children not receiving the desired attention due to a high child to staff ratio. The women appreciated the

services and support available but would also benefit from professional counsellors to allow discussion of sensitive issues, including unhealthy relationships, stress and violence. There is an increasing demand for talent enhancement programs, such as sculpture, painting and handiwork, as well as for the integration of modern technology into service delivery. Additional funding could help the LNCCDP build a positive and exciting future for the Centre and the city.

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Key Recommendations

There is one recommendation that can be carried out by LNC without the need for further resourcing:

- LNC can enhance agency **connections and partnerships** with tertiary institutions, local businesses and agencies within Liverpool Local Government Area, to attract a pool of volunteers in literacy and English language support, entrepreneurship and counselling. These connection and partnerships can also lead to the creation of employment opportunities for the people who they serve.

There are also recommendations that LNC can implement if they are successful in achieving further resourcing and support:

- Further **research and evaluation activities** should be conducted into some of the areas that are highlighted by this report. Further research into the gendered resource mapping within the local Liverpool neighbourhoods will enable the identification of community resources that women can access and control. These can be used to supplement LNC programs in advancing socio-economic inclusion and empowerment. Identification of the different pathways women take on completion of TAFE courses and the determinants of their success or failure will also be valuable for future planning.

- LNC should **expand the Social Enterprise Initiative** through the creation of a financial stream that offers small-scale start-up credit facilities at low interest rates to women in the neighbourhoods who have been trained and completed TAFE courses.
- Increase investment in the **LNC childcare support program** as a strategy for improved parenting practices for positive early childhood outcomes, and to provide an incentive to women's participation in paid work. This is anticipated to create safe neighbourhoods and reduce welfare dependency in migrant communities.
- **Develop talent-focused programs/courses of study** that reflect migrant women's creativity and uniqueness, and can be converted into small-scale income generating initiatives such as tailoring, painting, sculpturing.
- The model of targeting support at women while simultaneously providing services for children seems to be a very effective way of building long-term engagement, leading to community impact, and as such should be **replicated in other areas.**

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The full report is available on the Western Sydney University research repository.

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