SIMON HADDAD. ST ELIAS, JUNE 7TH 2022

1. HOW WELL DOES THIS TYPE OF PROJECT SUITS YOUR COMMUNITY?

WE ARE AWARE THAT THE MODEL BEHIND THE PROJECT WILL VARY IN ITS SUITABILITY FOR DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES, SO IF THE MODEL DOES NOT WORK WELL FOR YOU, HOW IT COULD BE MODIFIED TO WORK BETTER.

The model underpinning the Consortium Partners Project ('the Project') has worked well for the St Elias Antiochian Orthodox Parish Association Inc ('St Elias') church community. It is *flexible* enough to adapt to diversity within a community as well as across different communities. Its *community development focus* sits well with the St Elias community's self-reliance, especially its strong volunteer ethos and the *inclusivity* for people living with disability is in sync with Christian beliefs to include those who are often excluded.

Challenges experienced in implementing the Project

- This is a faith-based community and comprised of people from different nations so its identity is not based on nationality or specific cultures. Most people are business owners who work 7 days and week, so attendance at Church is low and sporadic. Even though this community attends Parish events irregularly, the majority of people come for Sunday services, and especially on Holy feast days which draw large numbers of people throughout the year. Attendance is driven by spiritual belief as well as social connection.
- Some of the Project guidelines were not easily implemented, in particular, those associated with Project participation. Some who were eligible on the basis of their disability did not meet the age requirement of the broader disability system (ie under 65 years of age). Some people living with disability were keen to be part of the Project but their condition did not fit the required disability profile. This slowed down the gathering of a Project participant group.
- Not surprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic was a challenge (outside of Project control) that reduced face to face participation for a significant period of time.
- Some members of the community have low levels of education which reduce their capacity for problem-solving and developing strategies for supporting people living with disabilities and their families.
- Because most of the Church community are older people, the involvement of younger people has been more challenging to achieve.
- Addressing the issue of stigmatisation of psycho-social disabilities has been another challenge.

2. WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH DISABILITY IN YOUR COMMUNITY, AND HOW THEY ARE NORMALLY ADDRESSED (IE OUTSIDE OF THE PROJECT)?

Although a common issue across communities is the stigmatising of disability, with the exception of psycho-social disabilities, the viewing of disability through the lens of Christianity can shift that tendency. The texts of the Bible repeatedly refer to disabilities and the importance of tolerance and inclusivity as the shaping principle.

Simon's experience with implementing the Project has been that this Christian perspective influences attitudes towards people living with disability in the St Elias community in a positive way. At the individual level, it is more likely to be the individual not wishing to identify as having a disability, rather than community negativity, that sees many not disclosing their disability.

3. WHAT EFFECT IS THE PROJECT HAVING ON HOW DISABILITY ISSUES ARE BEING ADDRESSED (IE ON LEVELS OF AWARENESS, ON ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN IN THE COMMUNITY).

- The establishment of this Project within the St Elias Antiochian Orthodox Parish Association Inc has allowed the community to engage with each other regarding the disability awareness initiatives that the Project has encouraged and supported. Simon describes it as being 'quite beneficial' to the St Elias community because it has galvanised already strong volunteerism to make additional effort to attend Project community events and meetings.
- The growth in understanding of disability, particularly by community leaders has been an important outcome of the Project, together with a growing acceptance of disability across the community. Simon discussed there is now an established trend to brainstorm issues relating to disability with the Father.
- The Project has identified people living with disability in the community who had not identified (or their families had not identified them) as living with disability.
- For example, the *Speak My Language* podcast that was created by MCCSA and spoken by St Elias Community Connectors has been well received within the St Elias community. The presence of a familiar voice discussing disability issues has been welcomed. Providing it in community languages has been very important to community access to its information.
- The next initiative is the recording of a video by the St Elias parish priest V. Rev. Father Georges El Tahan alongside a Community Connector which is also expected to raise awareness about the Project, disability issues and available disability services, including the NDIS. Already the ideas proposed by Siselo have been very well received and are expected to result in a valuable resource for the community.

  It also has the important effect of endorsement by a respected and trusted community leader, in fact, the most senior spiritual leader of the Parish.

4. ARE THERE SOME DISABILITIES THAT HAVE BEEN EASIER/MORE DIFFICULT TO ADDRESS?

It has been much easier to discuss physical and other visible disabilities than mental health-related disabilities and autism spectrum disabilities. There is significant stigma attached to those difficult-to-address disabilities, making it extremely challenging to raise awareness, provide information and educate the community. People with such disabilities tend not to be participants in community activities and therefore, have been less visible and less discussed.

5. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR ABOUT SUPPORTING PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITY AND THEIR FAMILIES?

- Throughout the course of the Project, St Elias has discovered that there is a large number of people in their community who are living with a disability, many of them doing so in silence, and without strong links to the wider community.
- The need to apply *co-design* principles to the design of facilities or supports for people living disability has been learned in the process of developing plans for the disability-friendly community centre modifications.
- An important lesson has been for Community Connectors to continually update their knowledge, or even refresh their knowledge on all facets of the NDIS. Otherwise there has been a tendency to forget the information even when it needs to be re-applied.
- Avoiding the labelling of individuals and instead targeting needs per se has been a valuable lesson.
- For community leaders the lessons relate to enhanced understanding of disability in its various dimensions.
- It is clear that the Project cannot be a once-off intervention and the need to continue awareness raising and enhancing acceptance of disability needs to be ongoing.

Simon also notes that every event every activity (even those that have been challenging or less 'successful') has brought valuable lessons and benefits in the process of learning those lessons.

6. WHAT HAVE YOU AND OTHER LEADERS IN THE COMMUNITY LEARNED AND GAINED FROM THE PROJECT?

See also Question 5 above.

St Elias and its community have discovered that there is a large amount of assistance available from local, State and Federal governments as well as from other organisations that are willing to assist in enhancing access for people living with disability. They have also found that there is an abundant amount of in-kind assistance that is readily provided by many individuals and even organisations.

Much of this stems from the strong volunteering ethos in the community which has provided an important foundation for the Project – for example, the Community Connectors have been drawn from the volunteer base.

7. DOES YOUR COMMUNITY HAVE ANY PLANS FOR ADDRESSING DISABILITY AFTER THE PROJECT FINISHES?

Building on the strong volunteering commitment, the community now sees a responsibility to make available the necessary volunteers to continue the Community Connector role.

The community has developed plans for a new facility for people living with disabilities, which will include a kitchen and toilets as well as a community space that are all accessible for people living with disabilities. Those plans are being assessed by the city of Charles Sturt City as part of a funding application to support the new facility.

Funding has also been sought from the MCCSA, and the State government to assist with further resources to continue the consortium partner Project into the next financial year, and in particular, to obtain administrative support.

The resources developed during the Project will continue to be made available.

With or without specific funding to continue the Project, it will be continued as part of this church-based community's activities which are part of the fabric of the St Elias Antiochian Orthodox church community.

8. ARE THERE ANY OTHER ISSUES YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS?

Simon provided additional information about the activities undertaken in implementing the Project, including a ppt of a recent stakeholder meeting presentation and an Activity Sheet for the Project detailing Activities, Date undertaken, Audience, Key Purpose and Outcomes and Feedback.

The Activity Sheet highlighted multiple events and activities, including:

- Official Launch, conducted by the 4 Community Connectors and the V. Rev. Fr Georges El Tahan (June 2021)
- Ladies Group Gathering conducted by 2 Community Connectors and the wife of the V. Rev. Fr Georges El Tahan (June 2021)
- Men's Group meeting that included information and awareness raising (October 2021)
- St Elias Festival (October 2021)
- Multicultural Festival which showcased the Project and the specific component being delivered by St Elias (November 2021)
- Podcast interview (in Arabic) with Community Connector Salwa Madback (December 2021)
- Disability Awareness Stakeholder Meeting (May 2022).