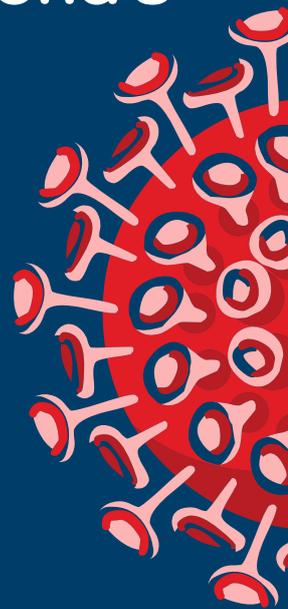# ECCV

The Voice of Multicultural Victoria

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

ISSUE BRIEF

JULY 2020

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Victoria's Multicultural Communities:

Survey with ECCV Members

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The COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted how interdependent we are as a society and as humanity. ECCV will continue to work collaboratively to ensure that all Victorians, regardless of their migration status or cultural backgrounds, can feel safe and welcome.

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the lives of all Australians in ways that were unimaginable only a few months ago. It is now clear that policies and human services will have to continue to adapt fast and operate under uncertainty for months to come. In this context, the need for cooperation across sectors and good governance has been accentuated.

Victoria is multicultural and highly diverse and only by working together throughout this crisis will we be able to find equitable solutions that prevent an increase in disadvantage for particular groups. The rise in COVID 19 cases in Melbourne since late June shows that a failure to address inequities in access to information, supports, and in individuals' ability to maintain strict social isolation for longer periods, might amplify disadvantage. As governments and service providers rethink the best ways to support the wider population, ECCV reiterates that effective and regular participation of multicultural communities in the design and implementation of responses to this crisis is fundamental.

ECCV has prepared a series of **Issue Briefs** that highlight the main challenges and recommendations in areas of priority identified in a survey of our members, and through our work with stakeholders during these initial months of the pandemic. This brief presents the main survey results as an additional resource for the multicultural sector and for policymakers, in our joint effort to adopt culturally appropriate measures that can help all Victorians to keep safe and well.

The ECCV Survey

In April 2020 ECCV distributed an online survey to its membership to identify major changes in communities, as well as the main concerns and opportunities arising from the COVID 19 pandemic. Just over 10% of members answered the survey. Whist that does not allow generalisation of results, the responses provide valuable insights and correspond with what ECCV has observed through its work during the first weeks of the pandemic.

With regard to main areas of concern for the future, the three top selections made by respondents were: **unemployment, financial wellbeing, and social isolation.** Mental health came fourth, and given its correlation with the other priorities, should also be highlighted. Additional comments from survey respondents revealed concerns about access to information regarding COVID 19 isolation, loss of income, access to Centrelink and myGov, immigration restrictions, funding for cultural and social activities, and the risk of increasing socioeconomic disparities, with groups that already face disadvantage being less likely to find employment.

Those themes aligned well with individual comments respondents made about how communities have been affected. Fear and anxiety were commonly used to describe people's feeling about their finances and employment. Rupture of social gatherings and social isolation (particularly for seniors), stress within households, risk of mental health deterioration, family violence and racism were all cited as immediate effects.

Question 1:

What are your community's major areas of concern for the future? Please select at least four as applicable.

Source: ECCV survey with members
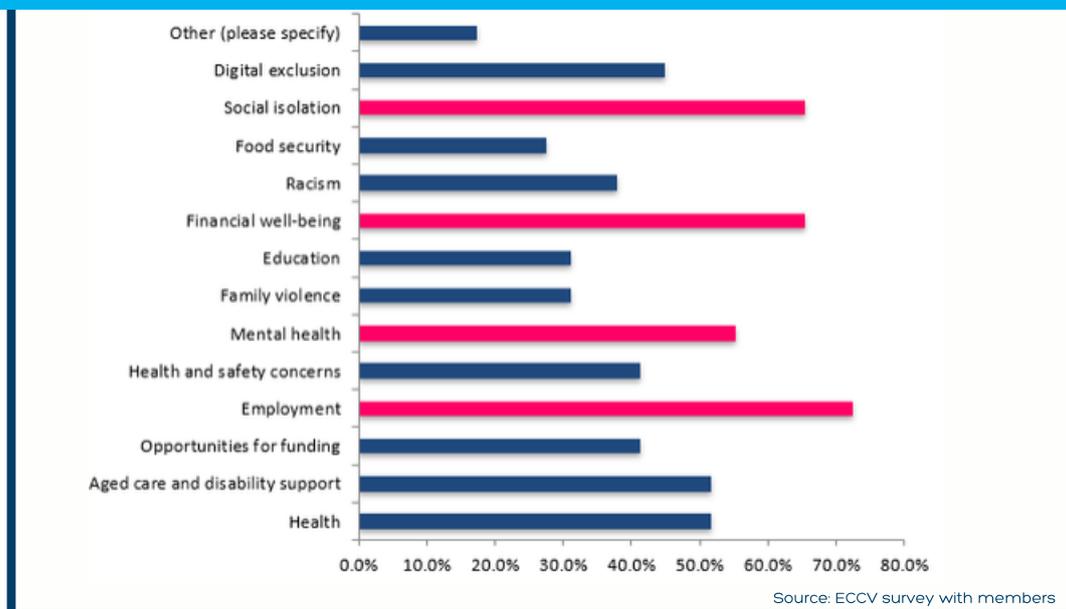
At the same time as the pandemic, community solidarity and group resilience have been fundamental as a source of support for ethnic and multicultural communities. For many ethnic seniors' groups and clubs, for instance, daily calls to provide information to other members who do not access online platforms or who are not fluent in English, collaboration with local councils for timely distribution of information, as well as use of Facebook and apps to maintain communication, have helped in reducing the high risk of social isolation.

Question 2:

What are some of the opportunities (if any) that may arise from the COVID-19 crisis for your community? (More than one choice allowed)

Source: ECCV survey with members
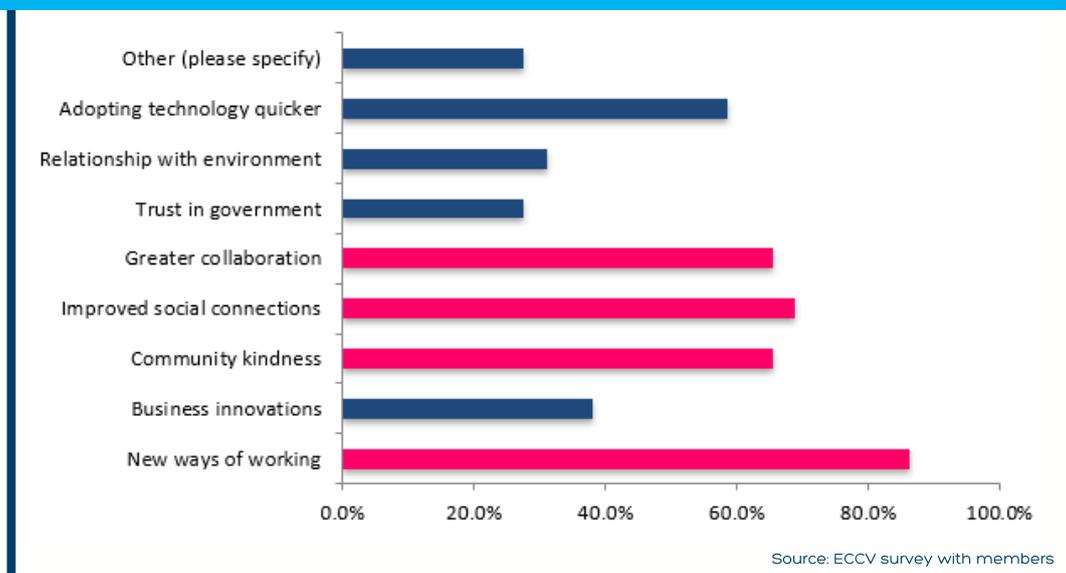
In addition to the adaptations people have made, the community service sector's shift to online work and service provision continues to require adaptation, financial investment, and maintenance of strong relationships with clients in order to ensure the lowest possible levels of disruption. Here again, an understanding of how to work with culturally and linguistically diverse clients, trust from specific communities, employment of bicultural workers, and specialised knowledge in areas such as migration and settlement support, have positioned many organisations as the core link between individuals and services more broadly. Many community service organisations have relied on their own creativity, staff commitment, and ability to repurpose to respond to the environment. However, as we approach the potential end of the federal relief payments in September, with spikes in infections of COVID 19 posing further stress on the labour market, a more sustained strategy to support these organisations and ensure their ongoing ability to service communities in need, must be considered.