

REPORT PREPARED BY

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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MERCURY RISING PHASE II

EXPLORER 2011 GRANTS PROGRAM AN EVALUATION

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR MENTAL HEALTH
SELF HELP GROUPS IN QUEENSLAND

MARCH 2012

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Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Executive summary	3
General key messages	5
Key messages for working with CALD Mental Health Self Help Groups	6
Introduction	7
Report structure	7
Brief overview of phase one of the Mercury Rising project	8
I. Evaluation of phase two of Mercury Rising	8
Overview of phase two of the Mercury Rising project	8
CALD groups	9
The grant process	10
Grant assessment.....	12
Grant distribution overview	13
Summary of The Mercury Rising Project by Gina Jacobsen.....	15
II. PlaceStories	16
III. Talking about capacity	20
IV. SHQ Case Study	21
Results	22
A. June Interviews	22
Positive changes.....	22
Negative changes	22
SHQ goals for the project	22
Perception of whether these goals were met	23
The impact of funding for Mercury Rising on SHQ as an organisation	23
Perceptions of the future for SHQ.....	24
In summary	24
B. October/November Interviews	25
Perception of changes in SHQ as a result of the Mercury Rising project.....	25
Positive outcomes of involvement with the project.....	25
Negative outcomes of involvement with the project	26
Changing understandings of the project.....	27

Of particular concern to SHQ management and staff.....	27
V. Project implications.....	28
References	30

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Executive Summary

Mercury Rising was a project funded by the Queensland Department of Communities to enhance the capacity of mental health self help groups in the community. Self Help Queensland (SHQ), a not-for-profit community organisation that supports and promotes self help groups, facilitated the project. The first phase of Mercury Rising occurred in 2008 to 2010 and focused on building networks and relationships, training and provision of grants. Further funding was obtained to run a second phase of the project in 2010 to 2011. This second phase focused on the provision of small grants to mental health self help groups and explored how these groups autonomously spent their funding.

The evaluation of this project was conducted independently of SHQ and the Department of Communities. Its purpose was to learn from the implementation of the project and to identify the likely key success factors. It is recognised that there are several potential approaches to supporting small self help groups for mental health and that we do not, at this time, have a comprehensive model for successfully engaging and supporting such groups. Mercury Rising Phase II aimed to address a gap in our knowledge by seeking to engage CALD self help groups. This evaluation contributes to the development of improved practice in this field.

This report on Mercury Rising Phase II describes:

1. The story of the project and its implementation.
2. The use of digital mapping by local groups as an innovation to the field.
3. The effects of change and learning for SHQ in the process of administering two stages of a mental health intervention for self help groups.

Overall, 140 mental health self help groups were identified and approached to participate in this project. A total of 110 grant applications were received from two rounds of funding and 100 grants were approved over two rounds, totalling \$127,770. Grants were distributed through 87 different self help groups, with 44% of all successful grants distributed to CALD groups.

The top three spending areas in descending order were:

1. Ongoing (operational costs including transport, mileage, printing, promotions, refreshments for meetings, insurance and incorporation costs).
2. Equipment (essential equipment to meet and provide support).
3. Events (participation in an event or function or to run their own event or function).

Online digital storytelling and mapping software was used to graphically represent all the mental health self help groups funded under Mercury Rising 2011. SHQ's PlaceStory project can be accessed here: <http://ps3beta.com/folks/ughcrc#!v=stories>. The use of such technology was well received by SHQ and could continue to be used as a tool in community networking.

Two rounds of interviews were conducted during the course of the project with SHQ staff, project workers and board members to assess the impact of project development and delivery on SHQ capacity. The interviews concluded that:

- The Mercury Rising project allowed SHQ to develop its organisational capacity and its capacity to support mental health self help groups.
- Through developing and delivering the Mercury Rising project, SHQ increased its sphere of influence and raised its profile in the mental health field.
- Increased capacity for service delivery resulted in increased workload and expectations on current employees of SHQ.
- Capacity was developed for mental health self help groups.
- SHQ felt that it had internal resource issues (time and workload pressures) and external resource issues (not enough money to support all groups that sought funding).
- SHQ developed relationships with a wide range of CALD mental health self help groups and feels more confident about working with CALD groups.
- SHQ developed skill and resource capacity for working with CALD mental health groups.
- The uncertain environment around future funding prevented SHQ from making permanent organisational changes to continue and extend this capacity.
- SHQ perceived a strong need for further funding and support for projects such as Mercury Rising.

Mercury Rising 2011 can be described as a successful project in its achievement of transparency, good communication and low levels of bureaucracy in a small, tightly focused and time-constrained program based on grants. Participation in the project developed the capacity of SHQ to develop and deliver such projects. SHQ learnt that: "We can administer big grants well, we can attract good project staff, we have learned which other components need to be in place to be able to grow our 'sphere of influence'." Capacity was developed within mental health self help groups who were able to access funds to support activities of their own choice. Through project emphasis on CALD participation, many groups previously unconnected to SHQ and to the self help sector were identified and given access to the grants program. Use of online interactive project mapping delivered a tool that will continue to assist with capacity building and networking within the mental health self help group sector.

Mercury Rising Phases I and II are examples of two different approaches to support capacity building for small groups. Phase II demonstrates the successful application of community development principles within the context of a small grants program funded by a government department.

General Key Messages

- For a project of this nature to build capacity successfully, it needs to focus on transparency in grant administration and decision-making, reciprocal communication between support groups and the organisation distributing the funds, maintaining low levels of bureaucracy, while ensuring a focused and punctual project timeline.
- The Mercury Rising Phase I and II provided the opportunity for SHQ to experience and learn about building its own capacity, including its limitations as a small NGO. Success in project implementation does depend on adequate resources to support the development of professional management practices alongside relationship building with both government agencies and support groups.
- Through developing and delivering the Mercury Rising project, SHQ has increased its sphere of influence and raised its profile in the mental health field.
- By offering practical support such as the small grants program, SHQ has been able to further develop and widen relationships with mental health self help groups. Practical support provides opportunity for self help groups to find value in their relationship with other coordinating bodies. Further, this can provide pathways to a range of other network supports, such as links between mental health and multi-cultural organisations.
- As a result of the small grants program, there is evidence that many of the mental health self help groups are widening their aspirations including how they attract members, undertake meaningful activities within the group and build links to others.
- A distinctive feature of this small grants program was that groups could choose how to use funds. The results show that groups chose practical aids that helped them function rather than formal training courses or other traditional forms of development.
- Uncertainty around ongoing funding prevents SHQ from taking steps to sustain organisational capacity in the longer term to deliver government programs of this kind. There are clear cost benefits in maintaining funding support for capacity to deliver grass roots funding programs such as this.
- SHQ perceives a strong need for further funding and support for projects such as Mercury Rising.
- A unique and encouraging outcome has been the use of emerging digital technologies such as mapping and online storytelling to support and document activities within the community sector. This outcome suggests digital technologies have a place in supporting a mental health community when introduced in ways that meet the needs of small groups.

Key Messages For Working With CALD Mental Health Self Help Groups

- SHQ has developed relationships with a wide range of CALD mental health self help groups that were not in the support network before the project. This network can be used in the future to access and support CALD mental health activities.
- SHQ has a more multi-cultural focus. Core members of SHQ have developed a greater understanding of the diversity of needs amongst CALD groups and their particular resourcefulness.
- SHQ has developed skill and resource capacity for working with CALD mental health groups.
- One of the factors for successfully working with CALD groups is community consultation. Mental health is not always an easy issue to approach. Understanding the perspective of the distinctly different CALD groups is important to the successful incorporation of CALD groups into mental health self help projects.
- As a starting point for working on mental health issues, it is productive to collaborate with already existing CALD support organisations as opposed to contact through mainstream mental health services.
- The CALD groups generally met for reasons other than mental health. It is through these activities that group members find support for their mental wellbeing. For example, a group of African women meeting for craft work find mutual support. A group of refugee men playing football find time to support each other. As a result CALD groups may not be specifically badged as mental health self help groups and processes need to be in place to identify and support these groups.
- CALD groups in this project chose to spend available funds on events and on skills-based training more than often than non-CALD groups. Non-CALD groups in this project focused more on ongoing operational costs.

Mercury Rising Phase II: Explorer 2011 Grants Program

Introduction

Mercury Rising was a project funded by the Queensland Department of Communities to enhance the capacity of mental health self help groups in the community. Self Help Queensland (SHQ), a not-for-profit community organisation that supports and promotes self help groups, manages the project. The first phase of Mercury Rising occurred in 2008 to 2010. Further funding was obtained to run a second phase of the project in 2010 to 2011. The Healthy Communities Research Centre at The University of Queensland was engaged to evaluate both stages of the project.

Following the conclusion of the first stage of the project, intensive discussions with SHQ led to a number of changes of emphasis in the evaluation of the second stage of the project. The purpose of this second evaluation was not only to examine how the project itself was conducted, but also to assist SHQ in developing its own capacity to manage projects and to provide useful services to the community that it serves.

Report structure

The evaluation of phase two of Mercury Rising was divided into three parts and this report follows the same structure. The first section describes the story of the project, that is, a narrative of what happened and why. This narrative draws on interviews with SHQ management and board members, project workers, documentation of the project by workers and key learnings from the evaluation of the first stage.

The second part of the report describes the geographical mapping of the project to tell the stories of the groups involved. In the past, information on groups and their use of funding was presented in a static manner. Here, the stories of the groups are presented using PlaceStories, which is an interactive mapping program developed through Feral Arts (<http://www.feralarts.com.au/>). Feral Arts is an Australian Council and Arts Queensland funded community cultural development company and social enterprise. The rationale and background to the use of PlaceStories is discussed later in the report.

The final section of the report is based on in-depth interviews and email discussions with SHQ management, staff and board about how management of a project such as Mercury Rising has changed SHQ as an organisation, with particular reference to capacity building. This part of the evaluation focuses on how SHQ may have changed and what it has learnt in the process of administering two stages of a mental health intervention for self help groups.

The report concludes with a summary of the impact the Mercury Rising project had on both SHQ and their client groups and discusses implications and possible learnings for future projects. To give context to these results, a summary of the first phase of Mercury Rising is provided below.

A brief overview of phase one of the Mercury Rising project

The first stage of Mercury Rising focused on four priority areas:

1. Networks: identification of groups and drawing them into networks.
2. Training: identification of training needs and provision of such training.
3. Small grants: provision of money to groups.
4. Relationships: building relationships between individuals, groups and networks.

Evaluation of this first stage of the project focused on these priority areas and addressed the question of whether capacity had been built in self help groups through the interventions designed and implemented by SHQ.

I. Evaluation of phase two of Mercury Rising

Overview of phase two of the Mercury Rising project

The second phase of Mercury Rising focused on the provision of small grants to mental health self help groups to enable them to develop their groups in ways of their own choice. A guiding principle of this stage of the project was that while mental health self help groups may be composed of individuals with mental health problems, as a group, there was capacity for decision-making and growth. This is a somewhat different approach to the first phase of Mercury Rising that focused on support of individuals within groups. Previous approaches emphasised training and personal development as part of capacity building. The model used in the second phase emphasised resilience and recovery based on the idea that group attrition is a natural process as people and their groups developed and evolved, sometimes into completely different groups. Groups were seen to be autonomous and their members able to make collective decisions about group needs and the best use of grants.

In response to funding requirements, the second phase of Mercury Rising also emphasised the identification and support by SHQ of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) mental health self help groups. These groups can be especially hard to locate and support because of community attitudes towards mental illness. One key finding of this project is that many CALD mental health groups appear on the surface to be merely social or cultural groups. This is seen to be because talking about mental health is a sensitive topic within many cultures.

Based on interviews with the SHQ project officer, Gina Jacobsen, the SHQ social work intern, Nicole Mitchell, SHQ administration and board members as well as documentation provided by project workers, it is clear that the primary goals for the second phase of Mercury Rising were transparency, communication and low levels of bureaucracy in a small, tightly focused and time-constrained program based on grants.

Project workers conducted an initial needs identification before the grant program was formalised. It was through the process of conducting this that it became clear that for most mental health self help groups, the most valuable aspect of a project was the small grants program. Members of mental health self help groups wanted to be allowed free choice in where to spend money and very few were willing to spend money on developing networks or training.

With regard to training, “some facilitators had difficulty articulating how training actually assisted their group’s abilities and sustainability. Rather the facilitators expressed their *liking of the social opportunity* and the certificates.” (emphasis added) (Mercury Rising Project: Initial Needs Identification, p.2) As a result, the decision was made by the Phase Two project worker to allow groups to make their own decisions about whether to spend grant money on training. That is, training was an acceptable use of grant funds but that groups had to decide for themselves if training was enough of a priority for their group to spend a portion of the money on it.

The first phase of Mercury Rising had developed a number of networks. However, with the exception of the Gold Coast network and a Brisbane network, which dissolved later in 2010, none of these networks continued after the departure of the project worker. (Mercury Rising Project: Initial Needs Identification, p.2) The Initial Needs Identification found that some groups were interested in reforming networks as long as they did not have to facilitate them (p.3).

A further finding was that group members were uncomfortable with having to attend network meetings in order to receive grants. This was felt to be too great an imposition on volunteer workers’ time. Current project workers also felt that requiring groups to make such a commitment negatively emphasised the unequal balance of power between the funding agency and groups seeking funding (evaluator interviews with project workers, 5 July 2011). Eight Brisbane leaders were approached to see if they would set up a new network if money was set aside specifically for this. Seven out of the eight leaders agreed. SHQ thus agreed to assist network meetings, but not to facilitate them. The emphasis in this case was on empowerment rather than dependency.

CALD groups

As part of the Initial Needs Identification, the SHQ project worker, Gina Jacobsen, talked with a number of multicultural workers to determine some of the issues that Mercury Rising needed to address in order to help CALD groups. Some of the groups involved in the consultation were Harmony Place, the Brisbane Transcultural Centre, Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT), Access Inc., Community Action for a Multicultural Society (CAMS) Logan, Townsville Multicultural Centre and Rainbow Group (Spanish Carers and Family Support). These groups were able to assist in fine tuning the grant scheme and also in locating groups to which the grant programme could be of assistance. A key focus at this point was identifying where to draw the line for defining mental health and mental health groups in order to meet both the funding agency’s agreed upon criteria for supporting self help mental health groups and the need to address access and equity issues for CALD groups.

Following the Initial Needs Identification two CALD focus groups were held; one in Townsville and one in Brisbane. In order to address the vital equity and access issues in a meaningful way, the central question for the focus groups was: “What does mental health look like in self help support groups from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?”

Conclusions drawn from the focus groups included the finding that words such as “wellbeing” were preferred over terms such as “illness,” “mental health” and “disability.” The Brisbane group preferred the phrase “social, cultural, spiritual and emotional wellbeing” (Self Help Queensland News, June 2011, 1). Focus group attendees also reviewed the literature generated by stage two of Mercury Rising, including the grant application forms, to ensure that it and the guidelines were suitable for CALD groups.

A key finding was that many CALD groups incorporated mental health into other activities in part to lessen the stigma of people seeking help. Groups that offered craft, exercise, cultural, religious or social activities and were badged as such, often incorporated mental wellbeing into their activities. However, screening grant applications based on criteria that excluded non-specifically badged mental health groups, meant many CALD groups would not qualify. For example, a mother’s sewing group run by a church could have as its primary focus the emotional and mental wellbeing of its members while being identified solely as a craft group. Adjustments had to be made to the selection criteria to make sure that groups that did address mental health were included even if that was not their primary description. Asking a group to describe their activities and what the normal group meeting was like meant that groups that did not address mental health issues could be excluded while others that did could be identified.

For phase II of Mercury Rising, successful integration of CALD groups into the project was assisted by community consultation, work with existing CALD support organisations and the development of CALD-specific selection criteria for funding.

The grant process

Grants were advertised through SHQ’s newsletter and website as well as through SHQ contacts within the area. Flyers that outlined eligibility criteria and potential spending areas for grants were printed and distributed. Specific criteria were set for eligibility and a primary goal of the project was transparency and fairness in distribution of the money. To be eligible groups had to satisfy all of the following criteria:

- Meet face to face regularly.
- Not receive recurrent funding.
- Not be part of a state-wide or national organisation.
- Not have been produced for the sole purpose of receiving the grant.
- Be willing to provide information back to the Explorer 2011 Grants Program on the

outcomes and success of any Grant their Group may receive.

Consider themselves a:

- Mental health self help support group or
- The group's goal must be based on improvement of emotional wellbeing.

Consider themselves either a:

- Self help support group or
- Mutual support group or
- Support network.

The SHQ website also provided a grant FAQ and advice on applying for grants and downloadable application forms. Groups were also invited to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) form if they had ideas for projects above and beyond their grant applications. These EOIs would only be considered if there was any unspent money after two rounds of grant-making.

A priority for SHQ in the grant process was accessibility: both to the application materials and also to the project worker who was available to advise and guide the grant process. The application forms laid out a range of options for assistance including the following statement:

Some of the ways we thought we might be able to help you include:

Acting as a 'sounding board'; maybe you need someone to listen to your ideas and discuss them with you in order to help you and your group be clear about what your groups wants to use the grant for;

If grant writing is new to you we are very happy to offer help and support in explaining the process or completing the application form.

In such a way, it was made clear that the purpose of the program was to work with groups to assist them to access funds rather than acting as a gatekeeper to money. This emphasis was also in the name given to the project: "Explorer 2011: explore•discover•appreciate." While the project worker clearly understood that in any grant-related scheme there was an inevitable dependency dynamic, active steps were taken to facilitate participation in the project and to manage residual and developing expectations. Some groups that had participated in the first round of Mercury Rising had some residual expectations about continuing support based on previous history. Project guidelines made it very clear to both these groups and to new groups that the current project was self-contained with a clear timeline and termination point. Public documentation for the project made the timelines clear and internal project documentation outlined an exit strategy.

In a similar vein, the spending areas suggested in the application were illustrated with examples to ensure that all applicants understand the terms. For example, the category "Operational Costs for

Ongoing Journeys” listed as examples “transport, mileage costs, printing and promotions, basic supplies like tea and coffee, insurance”. Thus applicants were able to, and in many cases did, simply select from a list of options for use of their grant.

Grant applicants needed to have contact details and contact people, describe their group’s purpose and provide information as to how often the group met and group numbers. They also had to answer four brief questions:

1. Please tell us what you do as a group when you meet.
2. Please tell us why people attend your group and how it helps them.
3. Please tell us what your group is proud of achieving (We want to know the unique features of your group and your success stories).
4. Please tell us how your group environment is welcoming to people from other countries and/or those who speak languages other than English.

The application form then asked applicants to select spending areas and outline a budget for how grant money would be spent. Financial information such as previous funding, ABN and bank details was then requested. Groups were asked to sign a statement saying that the group had discussed and agreed on how to spend money, how to manage the grant and that they would participate in evaluation and feedback. The applicant and two current group members had to sign this commitment.

This formal commitment had a number of useful functions. The most obvious was the legal implications: that groups agreed to use the money properly and return unspent monies to SHQ. It also served the function of reminding groups of the need for agreement on financial matters and ensured group cooperation by requiring three signatures. By asking groups to consider the statement being signed, it served an educative function and contributed to building group capacity.

Grant assessment

The assessment process had four stages:

Stage 1: Initial screening of applications for relevance to the project. Applicant groups needed to meet the basic criteria outlined above to pass this initial screening.

Stage 2: Personal details were removed from applications and each application was sent to two Project Advisory Group (PAG) members for evaluation. Applications were sorted into geographical areas and each application was review by one local PAG and one external PAG.

Stage 3: Project workers made a final recommendation based on the two PAG reports plus any additional information received by that point.

Stage 4: SHQ management made a final decision based on the recommendation from Stage 3.

While all groups used the same application form, CALD and non-CALD groups had their applications assessed differently. As already discussed, the “open question” parts of the grant application provided most of the information for informal assessment. SHQ also consulted with already existing CALD support groups as to the purposes and goals of specific groups known to them.

Grant distribution overview

One hundred and forty mental health self help groups were identified (Mercury Rising Project Key Outcomes/Highlights for SHQ September AGM). In total, 110 grant applications were received for two rounds of funding. In the first allocation, 51 applications were received and 43 approved. Of these, 26 were to CALD groups (60.5%). In the second allocation, 59 applications were received. In total, 100 grants were approved over two rounds in the amount of \$128,370. Grants ranged from \$600 to \$1,300 with the majority being for the maximum allowed amount of \$1,300. Forty-four percent of all successful grants were to CALD groups.

The primary reasons for lack of success in the grants were:

- Not meeting the criteria of being a mental health group.
- Being heavily supported already by other sources.
- Not being established yet and thus unable to provide three group member signatures.
- Providing services (such as accommodation) rather than self help.
- Being unable to satisfactorily show they are a group and not a private therapy arrangement.
- Purely being a social group.

Based on documentation from the caseworker, as of November 2011, \$127,770 was distributed to groups. The breakdown over the eight possible spending areas is listed below and shown in Figure 1.

- Explorer - Ongoing \$37,815 (general operational) [29%]
- Explorer - Discover \$11,700 (training/learning) [9%]
- Explorer - Explore \$12,452 (new groups) [9%]
- Explorer - Creative \$7,865 (networking) [8%]
- Explorer - Equipment \$25,617 (any to operate) [20%]
- Explorer - Event \$17,860 (festivals etc) [14%]
- Explorer - Wellness \$8,962 (recovery tools) [7%]
- Explorer - Unchartered \$5,510 (other areas) [4%]

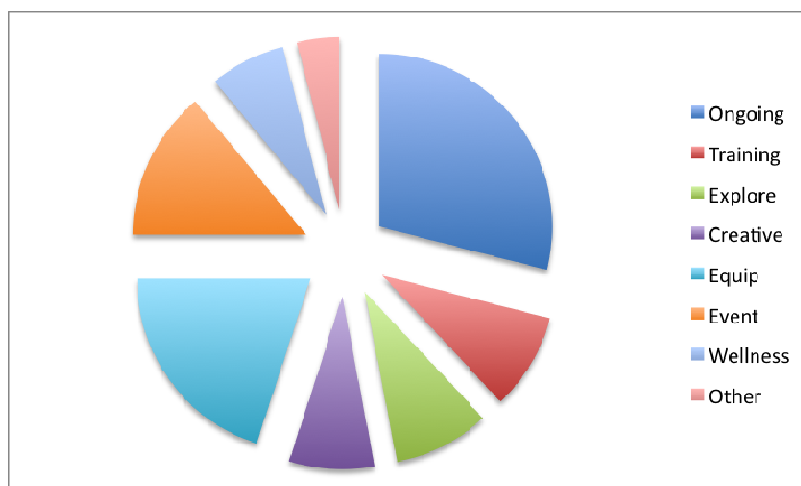


Figure 1: Explorer Grants 2011 Overall Spending Area Breakdown

The top three spending areas in descending order were:

1. Ongoing (operational costs including transport, mileage, printing, promotions, refreshments for meetings, insurance and incorporation costs).
2. Equipment (essential equipment to meet and provide support.
3. Events (participation in an event or function or to run their own event or function).

All other spending areas were relatively minor. Of interest is the fact that when groups were allowed to choose where to spend money, only 9% of the funds were allocated to training.

Figure 2 below illustrates the relative spending in each area. CALD groups spent more on events (typically to hold an event to promote their group to the wider public or for cultural celebrations) and on training (often computer or skill based training). Non-CALD groups spent more on explorations, that is, on helping groups find members and manage itself and on ongoing organisational costs.

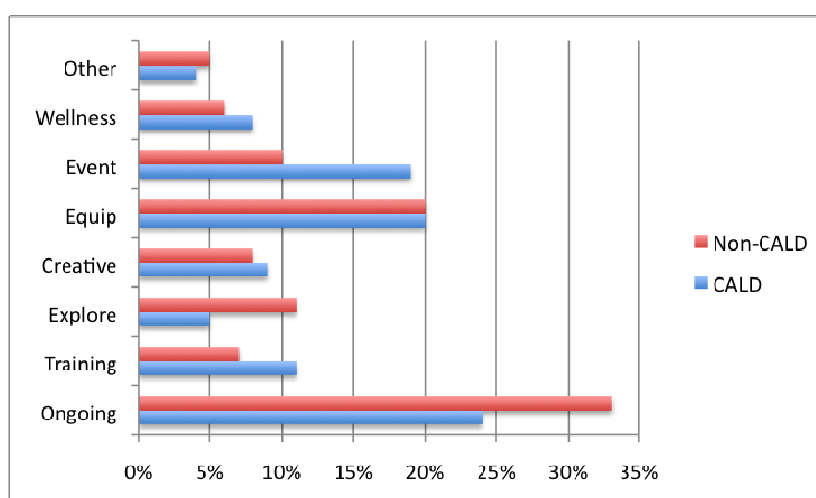


Figure 2: CALD and non-CALD Groups Spending Area Breakdown

By December 2011 all grant monies distributed to groups had been fully acquitted.

Summary of The Mercury Rising Project

Gina Jacobsen, Self Help Queensland Project Worker

The aim of Self Help Queensland's (SHQ) Mercury Rising Project 2010/2011 is to "build the capacity and sustainability" of mental health self help support groups with a focus on Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) groups across Queensland. This project aims to build on the achievements of the original project that commenced in 2008.

Through close examination of the project's past achievements, consultation with existing groups, Project Advisors, key CALD organisational members and SHQ, discussions with a key member of The University of Queensland and advice from the Mental Health Branch of the Department of Communities, the following project direction was decided:

- Groups would be identified, engaged, consulted, and supported through a small grants program called Explorer 2011 that aimed to explore, discover and appreciate groups.
- Spending areas for the small grant was emphasised to give groups ideas about how they could spend their small grant. The purpose of the defined spending categories was to identify and support groups spending priorities at that point of time. The following spending areas were defined into eight areas:
 1. Operational costs for ongoing journeys
 2. Learning and development to discover more
 3. New group explorations
 4. Creative connection to build partnerships and networks
 5. Equipment to survive and thrive
 6. Events
 7. Wellness resources
 8. Uncharted territory for other ideas
- Communication with group facilitators would occur through their identification, rapport building, support and feedback about how the small grant assisted their group.
- Encouraging group sustainability beyond this small grant was a focus of this project.
- CALD groups' needs would be prioritised throughout the project and small grant program development.
- Networking and partnerships between groups would be encouraged and supported and opportunities facilitated.

II. PlaceStories

In their own words...

PlaceStories is a software system for managing digital media, creating digital stories and publishing online through Google Maps.

PlaceStories is supporting the storytelling, networking and digital communication needs of community organisations, government agencies and other who work with communities, particularly rural and regional areas.

<http://www.ps3beta.com>

Using a tool such as PlaceStories to graphically represent a project is a powerful way to illustrate its reach and penetration into the community. It also provides an accessible and public way to understand who the funded groups are and how they used their money. It adds a level of transparency that is often not present in such grant-making projects and illustrates SHQ's commitment to fair and equitable distribution of funds. It also is a tangible project output that can become a historical reference for community groups and future projects.

SHQ welcomed the idea of creating a PlaceStories record of their project and the potential exists to use the Mercury Rising 2011 PlaceStory as a continuing tool for community networking. The project is searchable by area and keyword and it is hoped that groups interested in connecting with other groups will use it as a resource. SHQ also developed capacity within the sector by promoting groups by adding links on the postcards to individual group websites.

Less than one quarter of the groups responded to requests to "tell their own story" for use on the postcards. Information for the remaining postcards was taken from grant applications submitted by the groups. As much as possible, the original wording was used for group descriptions and what they wished to spend grant money on.

SHQ's PlaceStory for the Mercury Rising 2011 project can be accessed here:

<http://ps3beta.com/folks/ughcrc#!v=stories>.

As can be seen in Image 1, PlaceStories incorporates multiple tools for digital storytelling. There is a strong functional structure underpinning the site that allows for extensive databases and relates the data from the stories to an interactive map. A viewer can simply read the postcards individually as postcards (see Image 4) or they can use the map to locate stories by area (see Image 2 & 3). For example, there are large groupings of stories around Logan. A viewer can select the geographical area of interest and locate all the groups in this area. In such a way, the mapping of stories for the Mercury Rising project is not only a record of this project but also offers information on the location and density of self help groups for mental health in particular areas. Areas within Brisbane with more than two

mental health self help groups include Yeronga/Yeronga Park, Annerley, Moorooka, New Farm, Mt Gravatt and Darra. There are also large numbers of groups in the Logan, Kingston and Woodridge areas.

In spite of this clustering of groups around areas commonly perceived to be of social disadvantage, it can also be seen on the mapping (see Image 3) that mental health self help groups are spread across the urban area. What can be inferred from the group funding data alongside the mapping of the project is that CALD groups in particular are clustered around areas of new migrants. These groups serve the wider needs of the community in addition to mental health. Some groups are badged as social or sporting groups, but Mercury Rising's process of examination of attitudes in CALD communities leads to the conclusion that many of these groups act functionally as mental health self help groups.

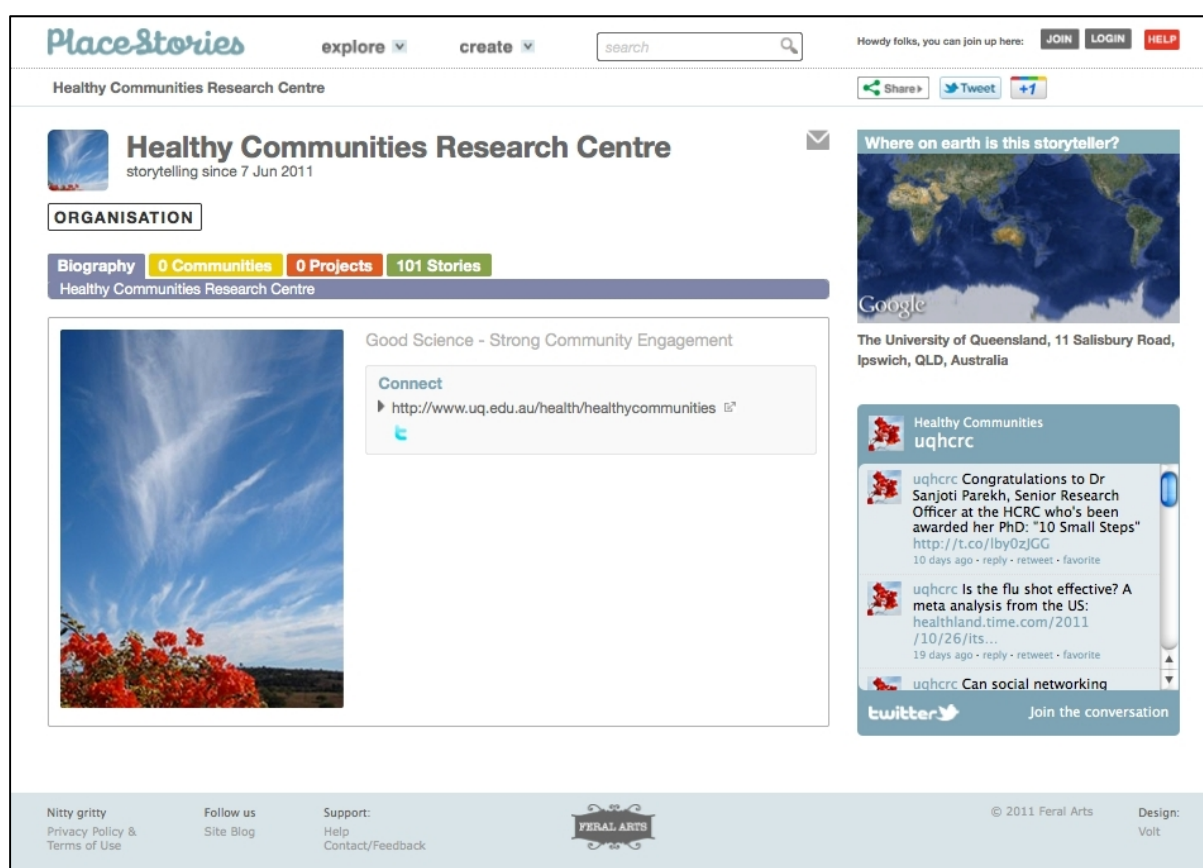


Image 1: The main page for The Mercury Rising Project

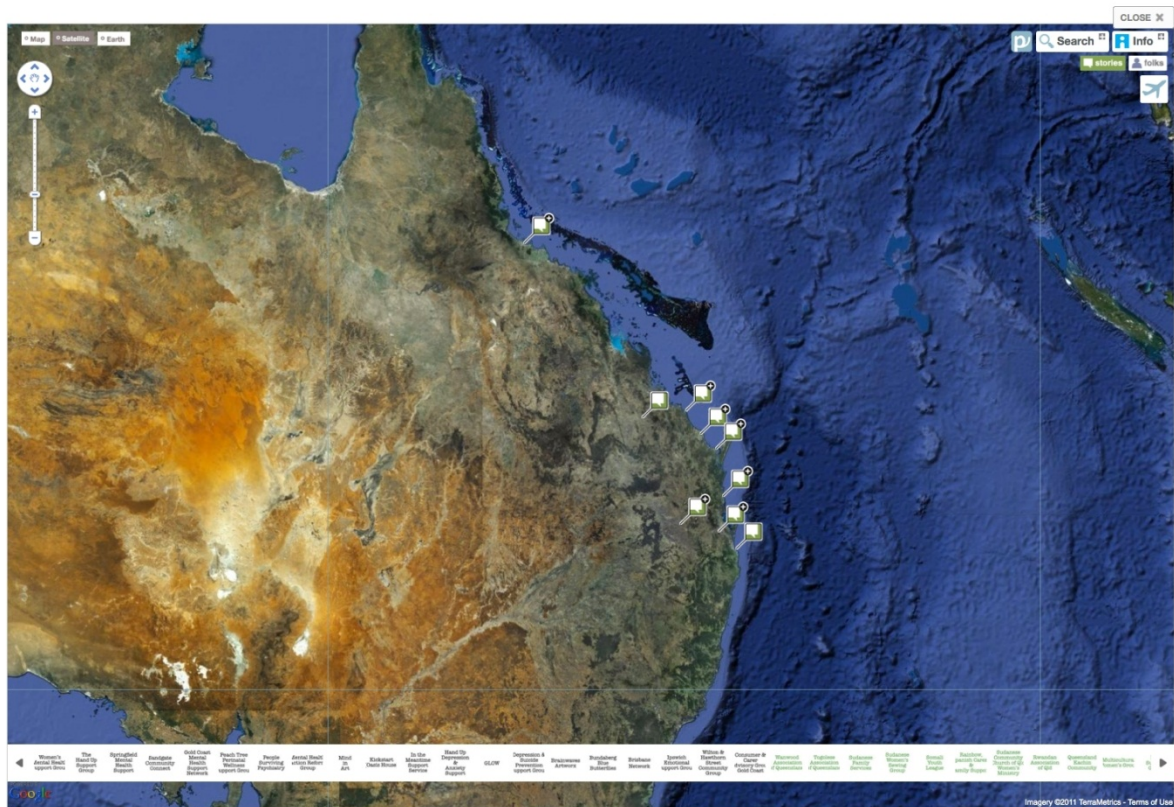


Image 2: State-level mapping of The Mercury Rising Project



Image 3: Brisbane-level mapping of The Mercury Rising Project

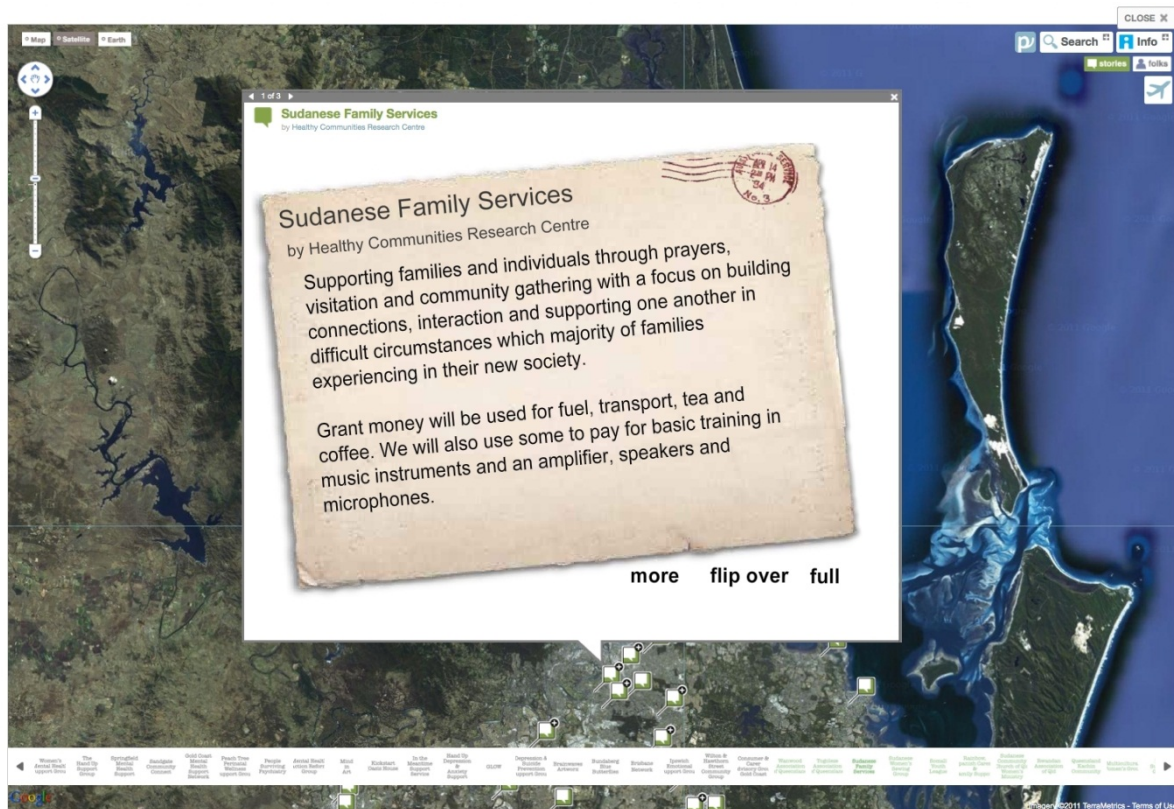


Image 4: Example of a funded group's postcard

III. Talking about capacity

There are as many definitions of capacity building in existence as there are groups doing capacity building. For ease of purpose the definition used here is that used in the Institute for Voluntary Action Research report on capacity building commissioned by the Big Lottery Fund in the UK. It refers to capacity building as “efforts to improve performance by developing skills and confidence.” (Cairns et al., 2010, p.13)

Evaluation of capacity building for small groups goes beyond simply measuring the assets of a group or outcomes of a project. The assets of a group refer to more than the financial. Assets include groups’ knowledge and skills; problem solving abilities; decision making capabilities; resources; networks and contacts; infrastructure to deliver programs; partnerships and organisational environment (Woodland & Hind, 2002). While enumeration and measurement are critical to any evaluation, it is important to understand the practices, processes and supporting structures of a project (Woodland & Hind, 2002). Gaining an understanding of how or why things happened as they did during the course of a project rather than simply measuring desired outcomes may provide important information about the capacity of both the groups involved in the intervention project and the organisation overseeing the project.

Bearing this in mind, this evaluation report takes two different approaches in examining the capacity of the Mercury Rising project. The project itself will be examined to tease out whether capacity is built for participant groups in terms of assets, infrastructure and general capability. It is fairly clear from the first part of this evaluation that in straightforward terms this project has increased the assets and infrastructure of 100 self help mental health groups in Queensland. An argument can be made that by empowering groups to choose what they need for their group, whether it be assistance with operating expenses, provision of social activities or group development through workshops, general capability has been increased. Through the medium of the grant application, groups were also encouraged to discuss and decide group priorities and to talk about group goals. In such a way, group capability was indirectly developed without the need for formal and sometimes awkward capacity-development processes.

SHQ will also be the focus of a case study on how participation in such projects can develop and change umbrella organisations responsible for administration and funding of interventions. The focus for the case study will be on understanding how or why decisions about the project were made and the impact this had on project delivery and outcomes.

IV. SHQ Case Study

In order to look at changes in organisational capacity, SHQ board members and employees were invited to respond verbally or in writing to a number of questions. Some people chose to reply by email, others were interviewed in person or on the telephone. The chairperson of the board, who is the CEO of SHQ, was interviewed in depth. The questions were designed to address specific issues while also being open-ended enough to allow issues of concern to be raised.

Two rounds of interviews were conducted in June and in October/November 2011.

The first round of questions were:

1. Do you think that running the Mercury Rising project has changed SHQ? If so, how?
2. What do you think SHQ's goals are in taking part in Mercury Rising?
3. Have these goals been met?
4. Do you have anything in particular that you want to share about the impact of the funding received for Mercury Rising on SHQ as an organisation?
5. How do you see the future of SHQ in the next 1-2 years?

The second round of questions were:

1. How do you think the Mercury Rising project has changed SHQ this year?
2. What have been the positive outcomes of the project?
3. What have been the negative outcomes of the project?
4. What is one thing that you feel SHQ has learnt from taking part in this project?
5. Has your understanding of, or support for, the project changed over the course of the year? If so, how?
6. Is there anything in particular that you'd like to share about the project?

Results

A. June Interviews

Positive changes

- SHQ has developed organisationally to meet the challenge of running Mercury Rising. This includes improvement in project management skills, financial management skills, policy development, general governance and office administration.

“... more goal driven...more active in playing a role in the Third Sector and more sensitive to future challenges.”

“Streamlined and improved business process documentation...”

- SHQ has increased its sphere of influence, its ability to help people and groups and raised its profile within the mental health self help group sphere.

“SHA has changed for the better because it is helping a lot more people now and can offer more support to more people.”

- SHQ has raised its profile in the community and with government.

“Before MR not many people knew about SHQ but now it has a raised profile in the mental health sector and with clients.”

Negative changes

- Being part of the project has increased the workload of current staff and physical resources within the organisation.

“There has been an increased workload for all SHQ staff when SHQ was not organisationally prepared for a sudden large increase in funding and staff levels. Increased workload has been complicated by lack of physical space and other resources.”

- The project has overshadowed SHQ's other work.

“Due to the intense nature of the project and its short timelines, staff and management have lived and breathed “Mercury Rising”. This means that the core business of SHQ has lived in MR's shadow with approximately 90% of SHQ's constituent base not receiving the benefits that 10% have received through Mercury Rising.

SHQ goals for the project

- To identify new groups
- To support these groups with information and resources

- To provide funds to empower groups
- To distribute funds fairly and equitably
- To assist groups to find their own solutions to improve their lives.
- To increase the number of self help support groups
- To make the community aware of these groups

Perception of whether these goals were met

Overall, all those interviewed felt strongly that Mercury Rising 2011 had successfully met SHQ's goals in taking part in the project. Both short and long-term impacts were seen to be positive. One person responded that:

By taking on this project, we have seen the identification of new groups emerge, training to support these groups, linking the groups in with other groups, provide networking opportunities and financial support to these groups.

However, interviewees were unanimous in their belief that the success of the project was due to the skills and extra time contributions of the project worker while resourcing of this worker and the project itself were not adequate for the scope of the project.

The impact of funding for Mercury Rising on SHQ as an organisation

The over-riding concern seen in responses was how the intermittent nature of funding for this project contributes to organisational difficulties within SHQ and to an organisational inability to fully commit to supporting self help groups.

“Staff recruitment, employment, induction, orientation and team building is an expensive drain on SHQ resources when it is for short-term projects. The cycle has to be repeated with new staff when new “one off” funding is received.”

“The Mercury Rising needs to be an ongoing service of SHQ, not just a project. Support groups are continuously emerging and becoming known to us and often they do not have the support, resources or information they need and quite often groups become disengaged. As an organisation we want to support these groups better and longer – ongoing funding will allow us to do that.”

“Funding for this project needs to be on an ongoing basis. The current system does not give us an opportunity to develop more than a yearly plan, whereas a three to five year plan would be more beneficial and produce better results. With a three to five year funding program we would be able to source and retain the best qualified people to manage the project.”

Funding raised budgeting and financial issues within SHQ that had to be dealt with as part of the project. Part of this is related to the development of organisational capacity within SHQ itself. As an organisation it has had to “be more diligent and have clearer understanding and agreement within the organisation, as well as within government, when allocating spending across various government grants.” There has been a greater focus on efficiency and accountability within the organisation that led one interviewee to conclude: “Optimistically this transformation is necessary for the sustainability of an organisation.”

Perceptions of the future for SHQ

Perception of the future for SHQ from staff and board members ranged from gloomy to pessimistic. There was a realistic understanding of the future as uncertain. However, opinion was unanimous that continued funding would benefit the wider mental health community.

“...it would be tragic if all our contacts with the mental health groups are lost due to lack of funding”

“Without this funding SHQ will still be there but without the benefit of recurrent funding this service cannot be followed up and perhaps many groups may even fold.”

“Recurrent funding would be a major plus for SHQ as more and more self help groups could be identified and thus improving the quality of life for people in our community experiencing various personal and mental health issues.”

In summary

- The Mercury Rising project allowed SHQ to develop its organisational capacity and its capacity to support mental health self help groups.
- Through developing and delivering the Mercury Rising project, SHQ has increased its sphere of influence and raised its profile in the mental health field.
- SHQ met its goals in participating in the Mercury Rising project
- Increased capacity for service delivery has increased the workload and expectations on current employees.
- Project funding did not adequately cover service delivery for this project.
- The uncertain environment around future funding has prevented SHQ from making permanent organisational changes to continue and extend this capacity.

B. October/November Interviews

Perception of changes in SHQ as a result of the Mercury Rising project

- SHQ's profile in the community and sector has been raised.

"It has raised the profile of SHQ - to groups, some organisations and some people in Government."

"It has become much busier. Put SHQ out there – increased our community profile."

- Capacity and capability has been increased within the organisation.

"It has required SHQ to become more professional- better at the organisational level."

"The skills of the Project Worker have led to more ownership of the Project by the organisation, and not just the worker."

"Personally, it has made me feel good about SHQ being involved in work that is meaningful and worthwhile."

Positive outcomes of involvement with the project

- Development and reinforcement of relationships with self help groups

"The wonderful feedback from the groups for their grants. They have shown such appreciation for such a small amount of money, amazing."

"There has been a great wave of recognition and support from smaller/newer groups and a better understanding of their staff about the great diversity of people and issues 'out there'."

"Identification of a number of new groups and a good coming together of some of these groups at the awareness day."

"SHQ has increased the number of groups it has contact with and broadened its base to include CALD groups and more mental health groups."

- Developing capacity for self help groups.

"Empowerment of groups – first attempt at submission writing for some of them."

"Small grants have actually made a big difference to groups."

"Resourcing small groups has given them the enthusiasm to continue."

- Development of internal capacity.

"All staff, not just MR worker, have become familiar with project."

“All staff have had more exposure to groups than previously, so gaining a better knowledge of most and building relationships with some.”

“Involving all staff has created better chances for future contact with these groups – this has already begun actually – this time, contact won’t finish when MR worker leaves.”

“Gave SHQ the experience of working with a social work student on practice placement for the first time.”

Negative outcomes of involvement with the project

There was a strong perception of problems with inadequate resources both internally and externally. Internal resource issues included time, project hours and work pressures. External issues related to not having enough money to support more groups.

What did SHQ learn from running this project?

- That they can run such a project well.

“We can administer big grants well, we can attract good project staff, we have learned which other components need to be in place to be able to grow our ‘sphere of influence’.”

- Organisational improvements

“We must resource up properly at all levels.”

“Commitment to prioritising, organising and management of a project.”

“Ways of continuous improvement – staff always reviewing better ways of doing things e.g. forms, processes, communication etc.”

“That administering a small grants program can incorporate all of the desired features e.g. consumer driven consultation, building capacity, forming networks, distributing grants etc at the one time, and do not have to be treated as separate pieces of work.”

- Working with CALD groups

“Staff now much better informed about working with CALD groups.”

- Project skills

“Clearer understanding of the working boundaries between SHQ and the funding body.”

“The process of applying funding.”

Changing understandings of the project

- The needs of CALD groups

“Greater knowledge and therefore greater empathy for refugee groups.”

“Myths about CALD groups not wanting to join the wider community, while not previously believed, now totally dispelled of any doubts whatsoever.”

“...the great needs the CALD groups have that are not being met by multicultural bureaucracies.”

- The needs of mental health self help groups in general

“Definitely increased understanding and support due to learning about the various groups and how they struggle to survive.”

“Learnings about how much groups can do with so little.”

“More benefits on both sides than just giving and receiving money.”

Of particular concern to SHQ management and staff

- The need for further funding and support for such projects.

“It is imperative that SHQ continue to lobby for further projects of this kind. It has proved that a little resourcing builds a lot of capacity, and this project may be the only resourcing some groups can access.”

“There is a great need for further projects which would be able to provide funding for small groups. The grant would need to be much more than \$300,000.”

- The need for highly skilled project staff.

“The skills of the Project Worker have a major impact on the success or otherwise of the Project. The bar has been set very high for Project Workers as a result of MR2.”

“...we need a hands-on Executive Officer for maximum work outputs within limited times...”

“...a salary for a whizz-bang Executive Officer so that the Management Committee can concentrate on forward directions for SHQ.

V. Project implications

The implementation of Mercury Rising Phases I and II and the previous work of SHQ provides an opportunity to consider how to give effective support for small self help groups through government funded initiatives.

Phase I was implemented through the leadership and personal networks of the project worker. The project worker was a “boundary spanner” being able to link to government funding bodies and a range of small self help groups. This provided assurance that the project could be rolled out through a network. This phase was directed by SHQ through the provision of activities across training, regional networking and small grants. The assumption behind this approach is that training, networking and funding support provided generically will meet the needs and aspirations of existing groups.

Phase II was developed differently with the application of community development principles. In this approach there was no assumption about training, networking or other needs. Rather, the principles of support and empowerment were applied through placing the choice of how a small grant is spent within the self help group itself. Further, to foster involvement based on the groups’ achievements, each group was encouraged to showcase their work by joining a digital network.

While the first approach may be described as capacity building in its traditional, prescribed form, the second approach is organic and seeks to build capacity directly by creating opportunities for innovation and decision-making by group members themselves.

The first approach can be understood as reducing risks in the implementation of the project through maintaining control and accountability at the organisational level. However, this may be seen as being achieved at the expense of local autonomy and skill transfer. The second approach has within it inherent risks in terms of accountability for public funds because it provides a greater element of choice by local groups. This approach gives the opportunity for group members to decide and take ownership of their own development.

The organisation itself had, prior to accepting government funding, taken a community development approach to its work with small groups. Mercury Rising Phase II can be seen as a demonstration of how government funding and a small grants program can be applied using development principles when these are carefully planned for and accountabilities are put in place in a way that does not infringe on group development.

In saying this, it should also be noted that funding, while invaluable and necessary to the continuation of such organisations, can be accompanied by organisational stresses and unintended impacts on client groups. Organisational stresses include increased workforce and workplace issues and competition over scarce resources. Of particular concern is the development of capacity within client groups and within the organisation that is unsustainable without continued funding.

Overall, Mercury Rising 2011 can be judged a successful project in its achievement of transparency, good communication and low levels of bureaucracy in a small tightly focused and time-constrained program based on grants. Participation in the project improved the capacity of SHQ to develop and deliver such projects. Capacity was also developed within mental health self help groups who were able to access funds to support activities of their own choice. Through project emphasis on CALD participation, many groups previously unconnected to SHQ and to the self help sector were identified and given access to the grants program. Use of online interactive project mapping delivered a tool that will continue to assist with capacity building and networking within the mental health self help group sector. In summary, a small grant program for small self help groups can build capacities when there is careful attention to accountability, community development principles and open communication.

References

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