

**Grant Culture and the Business of Community:
Indonesian Organisations in Sydney**

Nicola Frost

City University, London

This paper draws on research conducted in 2003 and 2004 among Indonesian migrant organisations in Sydney, Australia. It forms part of a larger study looking at the relationship several different such organisations have with both Indonesian and Australian administrations. The longer version of this paper takes a look at the theoretical genealogy of the idea of ‘community’, and comments on the difference between an organic ‘community’ and a formally constituted ‘organisation’, but here I’ll take these debates as understood, and concentrate on the activity of one organisation, the Indonesian Community Services Forum (ICSF), as it competed for government contracts to provide welfare services to Indonesian settlers.

I want to argue three main points. First, that in this example, the third sector – which is here understood through the idea of ‘community organisations’ - derives its functional value, or at least its relative freedom from scrutiny, from being neither state nor market, *yet it is intimately related to both*. Overwhelmingly, ICSF’s (voluntary) labours are expended on cultivating the ‘fictive unity’ of the Indonesian community, in order to secure financial resources and state support. The second part of my argument is to point out the paradox that this drive to demonstrate that ICSF was representative of a unified Indonesian collectivity, operated at the expense of any genuine, functional solidarity between Indonesian organisation in the city. Finally, I will suggest that the relationship between the ICSF and the Australian authorities was, in the period following the Bali bombing, characterised by something more than patron-client dependency. Indeed, the structural and rhetorical separation of ‘state’ and ‘community’ served to reconfigure relations of responsibility and accountability in debates about terrorism, migration, and social harmony in Australia.

There were in 2003 around 25,000 documented Indonesians living in New South Wales, overwhelmingly in metropolitan Sydney. Many of these were students, on temporary visas, but a good proportion were long-term settlers, either with Australian citizenship, permanent residency, or who were undocumented. The majority of these

long-stayers had arrived in Australia during the 1980s, though others had come much earlier. Although the rate of immigration from Indonesia was slowing, there were still opportunities for skilled people, or for those joining family. Indonesian people were largely invisible within the city – residents were widely scattered (in some cases isolated), and while avoiding some of the more severe social and economic problems of say the Vietnamese population, were certainly not participating fully in Australian life, either in terms of employment, or as regards their political and public image.

Given Indonesia's ethnic and religious variety, and in particular the history of heavy-handed nationalist rhetoric under President Suharto, which discouraged expressions of that variety, it is hardly surprising that migrants from the Indonesian archipelago in Australia have favoured forming organisations based on regional or religious affinity, rather than those with an 'Indonesian' label. The reasons for these choices are complex, and I'm not able to go into them here, but in 2003, of the around 100 Indonesian organisations in Sydney, only three asserted a pan-Indonesian constituency, claiming to represent people from across the country. One of these, Perhimpunan Indonesia, had been around since the mid-1970s, and combined a rather staid social programme with some well-established welfare work. The second was a small splinter group from the first, which had failed to gain much momentum. The third, which is the one I want to focus on here, was the Indonesian Community Services Forum, or ICSF. It was founded in 2000 by the Indonesian Consul General in Sydney as an umbrella structure in an attempt (not a very successful one, as it turned out) to gather the scattered and in some cases feuding factions of the Indonesian organisational landscape under one roof. This was convenient for the Indonesian authorities for a number of reasons, not all of them benign. The ICSF leadership had its own priorities, which I'll explain below.

Grants, communities, and organisations

'Ethnic' organisations have been a central element in Australian government immigration and settlement provision since a major policy review in the late 1970s. This review followed hard on the heels of the rescinding of the immigration restrictions resulting in what was known as the White Australia policy in the late 1960s. Although the 'ethnic group model' was later partly retrenched in favour of further attempts to mainstream migrant services, in 2003 ethnic associations remained

an important element in Australia's settler service provision. The practice of effectively sub-contracting the delivery of publicly funded welfare provision to migrant organisations was said to be an effective way of targeting services at marginal or hard-to-reach groups. Indonesian organisations provided a range of services, including advice and support on immigration issues, housing, benefits, employment, and English language classes for recent arrivals, as well as facilities for women and older people.

Winning government grants to provide settlement and welfare services was an important goal for the two larger Indonesian organisations Perhimpunan Indonesia and ICSF, for various reasons. It constituted an important point of intersection with various levels of the Australian government, especially the department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). In fact, the prospect of applying for and being awarded such grants was very often a motivating factor in organisations' activities. ICSF's leaders saw participation in the grants process as a vehicle for achieving several ends.

In the first place, the committee saw an opportunity to instigate a formal relationship with DIMIA. This was seen as a long-term strategy. ICSF president Jimmy Sumanti explained to me that it didn't matter if they were not successful in winning a grant in the first year; what was important was that ICSF was seen to make a start in engaging with the Australian establishment. In order to achieve this Jimmy considered it important that ICSF established itself as *the* representative of the Indonesian community. This was a hotly contested title – the rivalry between ICSF and Perhimpunan Indonesia was long-standing, and at times vicious. As the relative newcomer, ICSF was eager to become better known to DIMIA staff, and was having some success with this aim. In March 2003, DIMIA approached ICSF for help in organising an information session on aspects of immigration law, as part of a wider communication programme with migrant populations. Although those people who attended clearly benefited from the session, attendance was low. However, Jimmy was not daunted by this, as he felt the event had achieved an important aim: 'No one gives you funding unless they know you can run your finances. Now they have a basic evaluation of our capabilities', he said.

There was a perception within ICSF that a successful bid would do more than a hundred newspaper articles, meetings and events to persuade the wider Indonesian population of the competence, prestige, and predominance of ICSF, and of the benefits of affiliating with it. Jimmy's understanding of this was a very pragmatic one: he needed to be able to demonstrate that there were more reasons to be a part of ICSF than there were not to. Since his election in November 2002 (before which ICSF had wallowed in internal factionalism), there had been only limited progress in this regard; only about fifteen organisations were actually signed-up members of ICSF in 2003. The hope was that winning a grant would bolster ICSF membership and in turn strengthen its claims to represent the community.

Finally, a successful grant application would also mean that ICSF could 'compete' with other migrant groups that had been granted substantial sums recently. Jimmy studied the lists of successful grantholders on the DIMIA website carefully, and announced at one meeting that a Laotian organisation recently had been awarded a \$100,000 grant, while so far the Indonesians had nothing. He did not specify what the money had been granted for – the important thing was that it had been granted, and that the Laotians now featured in the table of grant recipients. Such comparisons served only to harden perceptions that cultural distinctiveness was the key to financial success, and to relegate the idea of collaboration between organisations across national boundaries (to say nothing of within them) to low priority. Grant culture – the orientation of such organisations towards grantgiving institutions and priorities – constitutes a system that financially rewards (cultural) difference, within certain predetermined and carefully circumscribed boundaries. The awarding of a grant has the effect of sustaining those boundaries, to the point where what the money is for, and how it is spent, are of secondary importance. Taken to an extreme, grants provide an index of the success of 'community' within the scope imagined by government.

Accordingly, in 2003 ICSF applied for money from DIMIA's Community Settlement Services Scheme (CSSS), the major source of welfare funding for migrant organisations. This bidding round coincided with the launch of a new system for managing migrant advice workers. Given the raft of anticipated benefits stemming from the allocation of government resources, the stakes for organisations making grant applications were high. Within ICSF, it was considered important that the

application was compiled in an efficient and professional manner. The person on the ICSF committee with the most extensive knowledge of the welfare needs of the Indonesian community was Laksiri Hakim, the vice president. She had worked since 1997 as a welfare adviser, providing advice and practical support to Indonesians (especially new settlers) to help them negotiate the benefits system, find decent accommodation, join English language classes, and deal with the immigration authorities. Already well-versed in the problems facing new Indonesian migrants, Laksiri was in 2003 completing a home-study course in immigration law, hoping to qualify as an immigration agent, not, she explained, as a profit-making enterprise, but in order to provide better advice to her clients. Laksiri was also experienced in winning and managing Australian government funding for both social and cultural projects. She had been secretary of the West Sumatran organisation Minangsaiyo in the mid-1990s when it secured funding for its dance troupe's participation in the National Folkloric Festival several years running. She'd even won a state award for her contribution to community life. In effect, she was the incumbent DIMIA advice worker, paid through a grant managed through the outgoing system under the auspices of Perhimpunan Indonesia.

Despite Laksiri's experience, Jimmy asked the businesswoman wife of a committee member to oversee the application process. Virginia was CEO of a company that ran technical training schemes for the mining industry. She tore through the form at one meeting, scribbling briskly, and joking about how much her time was worth. Laksiri's attempts to interject were lost in a businesslike whirl. The application was successful, yet ICSF gained efficiency and an ability to mimic the vocabulary of the grantgivers at the expense of drawing on the opinions of those with experience of the needs of prospective beneficiaries, and of the practicalities of managing such a grant. In view of the short lead times involved in many grant application timetables, wider consultation, even within the ICSF membership, was necessarily limited, despite a donor requirement that this was undertaken. The process of grant applications was effectively professionalised, and distanced from the 'community'.

It is interesting to compare this process with the tendency for Indonesians in Sydney to consider 'community' to be associated with morality and altruism, as distinct from market principles. People would complain that they weren't given discounts on for

example photocopying costs, despite the fact that they were doing things ‘for the community’. Events whose basis was too brazenly commercial compromised their ‘community’ status in the eyes of many onlookers. An Indonesian festival organised by Indopages, a Chinese Indonesian business in March 2003 at Darling Harbour in the centre of the city exhibited many of the characteristics of the Independence bazaars: there were opening speeches by Indonesian and Australian dignitaries, dances and performances throughout the afternoon, and stalls selling an array of Indonesian food. Owing to its prime location, many thousands of people attended, and the event was judged by the organisers and the consulate to be a great success. But onlookers from other organisations expressed their disapproval by suggesting that the event had been about business, and not a ‘community festival’.

All hub and no spokes

In mid-2003 it was announced that ICSF had won their first DIMIA grant worth \$30,000, for ‘Information, referral, capacity building and service planning and development for the Indonesian community in the Eastern Suburbs, Botany and St George’. ICSF was awarded a repeat CSSS grant of \$42,300 in the following financial year. Although ostensibly a successful outcome, the experience of implementing and managing the grant was extremely problematic for ICSF: the operation of the grant entailed significant changes to the existing method of service provision, and serious staffing difficulties. In addition, a shift in perceptions of responsibility for migrant services from government to ICSF placed an even greater strain on intra-community relations.

Under the previous system, state-funded Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) employed managers to oversee the work of the various advice workers operating from their premises throughout the city. The new grant saw this supervisory responsibility transferred to ICSF, who would recruit and manage an Indonesian advice worker. Representatives of sections of the Indonesian population would advise and liaise with the project officer, who would in turn report to the DIMIA caseworkers. The new system was apparently intended to bring service provision and management closer to its beneficiaries. In practice, this burden was shouldered by a very small number of (unpaid) people.

On a return visit to Sydney in September 2004, I met Malcolm Wright, the ICSF project officer responsible for managing the DIMIA grant. He explained that DIMIA had made what he considered unrealistic stipulations that the new advice worker should be a qualified social worker. When combined with the practical necessity for the post-holder to be an Indonesian speaker, the result had been an extremely protracted recruitment process. Even with someone in post, Malcolm doubted the DIMIA staff had a clear idea of ICSF's capacities. He complained: 'they have effectively handed over all responsibility to ICSF and imagine a whole network of people ready to do the work, when in reality it's just the two of us'. The promised sectoral representatives never materialised. Malcolm was finding it increasingly difficult to balance the demands of the grant with earning a living for himself and his family, and felt annoyed that so much had been demanded of ICSF, without provision of the necessary support. Malcolm told me: 'we're about to miss a DIMIA milestone, to hold a consultation focus group to find out what kinds of services people need'. He smiled grimly when I pointed out that an initial application for funding to carry out a scoping study to identify community needs with relation to settlement and welfare services was rejected by DIMIA in favour of an operational grant for service provision.

DIMIA's insistence on social work qualifications (eventually overridden, given the difficulty of recruiting) contributed to tension within ICSF. It prevented Laksiri from effectively re-applying for her own post, causing considerable upset and anger. Part of this resentment was inevitably directed at the project team, though they were powerless to influence DIMIA's criteria. Malcolm suggested communication between the ICSF committee and the member organisations remained a problem: 'We're supposed to be an umbrella organisation, but at the moment we are all hub and no spokes'. Such internal wrangling only worsened the stand-off between PI and ICSF. I asked Malcolm what he thought 'community development' meant. He replied: 'for me it would be everyone working together', but he admitted it might already be too late. In effect winning the DIMIA grant from Perhimpunan Indonesia hardly helped matters. The introduction of a relatively large sum of money into Indonesian affairs only added fuel to this fire, prompting suggestions of corruption. Malcolm felt very frustrated by all of this: 'who loses? The community', he said.

Living in Harmony

On top of this subcontracting relationship between voluntary organisation and state body, migrant organisations had a central role to play in government initiatives aimed at showcasing and celebrating harmonious diversity in the Australian population. One of the major strategic directions of the Howard government in managing diversity was the Commonwealth *Living in Harmony* initiative, administered by DIMIA. This has been most visible to the public in New South Wales since 1999 in the shape of Harmony Day, held in late March to coincide with the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. According to the official briefing pack, the day provides an opportunity for Australians ‘to get to know each other better by:

- Promoting our community’s success as a multicultural society;
- Re-committing ourselves to respect, goodwill and understanding between all Australians of all backgrounds; and
- Saying “no” to racism.’ (DIMIA 2003b:2)
-

The briefing pack also claims: ‘Community Organisations are at the Heart of Harmony Day... They are also the *heartbeat* of Harmony Day’ (DIMIA 2003b:6). Such groups were encouraged to use Harmony Day to promote their activities to the community, and to ‘demonstrate in practical ways what diversity means to them’. ICSF enthusiastically embraced this opportunity, and ran a one-day Indonesian food and cultural festival to coincide with Harmony Day. In a longer version this paper I explain how this came about, and how it was seen by the ICSF leadership as another opportunity to showcase organisational capacity. It’s worth noting that here ‘Community organisation’ appears to be a euphemism for ‘ethnic group’. The activities encouraged on Harmony Day were after all intended to facilitate the prescribed ‘saying no to racism’.

The Living in Harmony initiative also included a small community grants programme. A revised policy document on Australian multiculturalism was published in 2003, a few months after the Bali bombing. It cited a perceived need to look carefully at multicultural practice in the light of the threat of global terrorism, and the impact this had had on Australian community relations: ‘National security begins with community harmony’ (DIMIA 2003c:7). In this document, entitled *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity*, the government reaffirmed its commitment to the

Living in Harmony initiative, and announced that it was extending the funding for the related community grants programme for a further four years from 2002, providing \$3.5 million annually. The rubric of this grants programme explained that the funds were aimed at improving ‘grassroots participation in developing local solutions for local problems’ (DIMIA 2003c:8). It suggested that successful projects would be those that ‘address issues of racism and promote harmony in community settings’.

The link suggested by the geopolitical context of the review, and its recommendation to extend the community grants programme is that, however indirectly, the government saw support for [the right kind of] ‘ethnic groups’ as part of the war on terror. Community is configured here as the opposite of top-down government, and implies grassroots participation, albeit not through a formal democratic process. However, despite this explicit connection between community action, racism, and terrorism, community continues to be regarded as a non-political concept. The value of community is not defined, let alone interrogated or justified.

There is an altogether more troubling aspect to the suggestion that funding community organisations can constitute action against racism and terrorism. In placing the emphasis on community organisations as a key vehicle in achieving the ‘community harmony’ it seeks, the onus is therefore on the groups themselves to act to prevent disharmony. In one sense this illustrates another aspect of the observation made by Ghassan Hage and others about the unremittingly Anglo core of Australian social policy (Hage 1998). Just as it is the privilege of Anglo-Australia to choose to tolerate non-Anglo migrants (the idea of the toleration being bestowed in the opposite direction is anathema), so it is the responsibility of ethnic organisations to maintain community harmony. In this context the distinction between organisation and community is critical; who can be held accountable if harmony breaks down? If the limits of an organisation’s influence and authority are not acknowledged, how can limits be set on the extent of its responsibility if things go wrong? These questions were particularly pertinent after the Bali bombings, when public attention turned to ‘the Indonesian community’ in Sydney, without an accompanying recognition of its organisational complexity.

Jean Martin's seminal study of migrant settlement policy in Australia (1978:64) assumes that ethnic organisations originated as welfare providers, with solid grassroots support and expertise, through which they subsequently moved into the public sphere, and were influenced by policy priorities. In the ICSF's case, a desire to engage with the authorities through welfare *preceded* any experience of service provision, or, indeed, the development of a stable constituency. The stringent requirements DIMIA then imposed meant that criticism was levelled at ICSF from within the Indonesian population for failing to manage the situation effectively. Those inside ICSF were unable to protest at the unreasonable conditions imposed, for fear of jeopardising their 'trial period' grant status, yet 'the community' blamed them for what was interpreted as ineptitude and greed (Vasta 2004). While DIMIA was able to take advantage of the rhetorical capital deriving from an association with 'community', ICSF found itself under pressure on all sides, and the 'community' itself remained as divided and uninvolved as ever.

Conclusion

As Jeremy Brent reminds us, 'community is not a term suitable for use as an unequivocal slogan of redemption' (Brent 1997:82). Despite this cautionary note, community retains its rosy glow and prominent role in Australian multicultural relations.

This paper has suggested that community can be most helpfully understood as a dynamic site for interaction and strategic use of cultural resources. Vered Amit notes, 'it is more credible to view proclamations of community as first and foremost claims of, and for, social engagement' (Amit 2002:10). This is clearly apparent in the preceding discussion of grant applications. There is a level here of symbolic negotiation and positioning that has little to do with settler services, and everything to do with the construction of a multicultural pact: the state colludes in the maintenance of the fiction of a unified and representative community in order to facilitate the use of ethnic organisations for migrant services provision and 'community harmony' activities; in so doing it passes responsibility for these functions to institutions it knows may not have majority support in the constituencies they claim to represent. More worryingly, a shifting of what has previously been considered state responsibility for social cohesion and security onto the shoulders of poorly

understood, and minimally representative voluntary organisations, has serious implications for understandings of democracy, accountability and 'governance'.