

Nurturing Links Across Civil Society:

Lessons from Australia's For-Purpose Sector's Response to COVID-19



Report of the Strengthening Australian Civil Society Initiative

February 2022



About Strengthening Australian Civil Society

Strengthening Australian Civil Society is a bold new initiative which aims to build a stronger and re-energised Australian civil society. By capturing and sharing Australian and international insights, stories and strategies we support civil society to become a powerful engine of creativity, connection, knowledge and innovation grounded in everyday lived experience.

This initiative emerged from a strategic partnership between the Sydney Policy Lab and the Paul Ramsay Foundation. It is powered by a collaborative team of researchers based at the Sydney Policy Lab and an Advisory Panel of community and civil society leaders from across Australia, led by the Lab's inaugural Director, Professor Marc Stears.

We welcome contributions, critiques and ideas for potential collaborations from across civil society and beyond.



About the Sydney Policy Lab

The Sydney Policy Lab is a multidisciplinary research institute at the University of Sydney and a non-partisan space where people from all walks of life can meet and develop plans collectively for the future. We exist to forge collaborative relationships between researchers, civil society, industry, politicians, and policymakers that are capable of creating new knowledge and driving change that would shape an Australia which is more equal, where power is in the hands of everyday people, and where more people feel a secure sense of belonging in their own society.

The Lab develops original and far-reaching research projects which unite the grounded wisdom that comes from everyday experience and the perspectives gained from rigorous scholarship.

We work in partnership with institutions who seek to put new ideas into practice. Our unique way of working strengthens the ability of our researchers and partners to collaboratively generate new ideas, transform the ways they work and effect change.



Acknowledgements

The Sydney Policy Lab acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises their ongoing connections to land, sea and community. The University of Sydney and Sydney Policy Lab are on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The contents of this report reflect the wisdom and experience of incredible individuals and organisations across academia, civil society and the broader community in Australia and internationally. The Sydney Policy Lab is indebted to the generous and invaluable feedback from participants, interviewees and advisers. A full list of these people can be found as an appendix.

This report represents the views of the authors as informed by the research process.

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Download the report from the [Sydney Policy Lab website www.sydney.edu.au/sydney-policy-lab/](http://www.sydney.edu.au/sydney-policy-lab/).



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60-second Summary

The impacts of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic have stretched far beyond the immediate public health concerns. Over the course of the pandemic, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team has engaged with leaders and practitioners from across the country in a series of reflective conversations that focused on four broad capability areas, essential considerations for those who build and support strong and resilient communities – developing leadership as a practice, continually renewing connections to community, working in networks across systems, and building the influence to advocate effectively. Through examining the barriers and enablers to working in each of these capability areas, as experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic, this report highlights core principles for civil society capability and makes strong recommendations for civil society organisations, policymakers and funders which can collectively nurture and strengthen the links across civil society.





Executive Summary

What can civil society organisations learn from the COVID-19 pandemic as they seek to combat entrenched disadvantage in Australia? Can stronger civil society organisations emerge from the experience of the pandemic? What does the broader community have the right to expect from Australian civil society?

The impacts of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic have stretched far beyond the immediate public health concerns. The need for people to distance physically from each other shut down entire industries, threatening the economic stability of hundreds of thousands of people. Policy decisions such as border closures, lockdowns and home-schooling separated us all from family, friends, and other essential social connections that we rely on for our wellbeing. In Australia, key sources of support for people and communities who were struggling included the thousands of non-government, not-for-profit, volunteer-driven, for-purpose and community-orientated organisations. Collectively, these *civil society organisations and practitioners*, on top of challenges of their own, rallied to support people and communities in need.

Over the course of the pandemic, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team has engaged with leaders and practitioners from across the country. We have reached across the wide variety of narrow sub-groups, categories and sectors, to obtain a broad picture of how groups and organisations that are primarily orientated towards building and supporting communities responded to the challenges of COVID-19. Through a series of deep and reflective conversations, including workshops, in-depth interviews, public events, and review panels, our researchers have supported these *civil society leaders* to reflect on their experiences and what can be learned from them. Universally, the people we spoke to were united in two things: their passion and commitment to supporting those who need it most and their enthusiasm for being part of strong relationship-based networks where learning and collaboration can occur.

These reflective conversations with civil society leaders focused on four broad capability areas, essential considerations for those who build and support strong and resilient communities. History teaches us both that crises will continue to emerge, and that absorbing the worst impacts and rebuilding relies on the strength of the links and interconnections within and across communities. Nurturing these links requires civil society organisations to:

- (1) Develop sophisticated approaches to leadership that recognise and encourage emerging leaders within communities (**leadership**).
- (2) Create stronger connections with the people and communities that they aim to support, serve and advocate for (**community connection**).
- (3) Build strong and collaborative networks centred on community need that can overcome systemic challenges and complex problems (**systems and networks**).
- (4) Generate the broad-based power and influence required to advocate effectively and create change (**advocacy and influence**).

The research process revealed a variety of insights into these four capability areas. People that our researchers spoke to identified barriers that got in the way of people and organisations staying true to their purpose. They also highlighted factors and practices which have enabled them to achieve their goals. Through a collaborative and discursive review process, civil society leaders identified and agreed on a series of principles in each of these capability areas, intended to guide future advocacy, research and conversations across the sector. This process culminated in six key recommendations for those interested in strengthening civil society capability, including governments, philanthropists, and of course civil society organisations themselves.





Capability Area 1: Leadership

Leadership is increasingly regarded as a skill and practice that must be developed, learned and refined over time. This includes moving away from *heroic individual* and *command and conquer* styles of leadership towards a more relational and adaptive process, requiring people in leadership positions to consciously develop leadership in others and create spaces for grassroots leadership to grow organically. Civil society leaders engaged through this research project identified that failing to see the bigger picture, being consumed by operational matters and being stuck on a narrow path all served as barriers to developing and practising leadership. They also observed the utility of creating relationships across difference, fostering leadership in others, and acting collectively in response to change. Discussions around these barriers and enablers identified three key principles:

- (1) Non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations can play an important leadership role in society, often challenging entrenched power structures and systemic disadvantage. To succeed in this role, organisations need to work collaboratively to take calculated risks.
- (2) Leadership is a skill that can be nurtured and developed. It is also important to look beyond notions of top-down leadership and understand that leadership requires careful cultivation of respectful relationships within existing networks, as well as new connections across difference.
- (3) An important aspect of leadership is recognising the leadership of others, nurturing emerging leaders within organisations and networks, along with looking for, engaging with, and encouraging leadership in communities that civil society organisations aim to represent and serve.



Capability Area 2: Community Connection

Governments, industry and civil society organisations all have a vested interest in genuinely connecting to communities; yet doing so effectively is easier said than done. Top-down, charity-oriented and other elitist approaches to addressing systemic challenges, such as poverty and

entrenched disadvantage, are now well-established as being costly and ineffective. This has seen a renewed interest and commitment to community-led and place-based solutions, ensuring that people are at the forefront of designing and implementing solutions to the challenges they face. Our conversations with Australian civil society leaders revealed that a charity mindset, transactional cultures and the collective erosion of trust all make it harder for civil society organisations to build genuine and powerful relationships with the people they aim to serve. At the same time, these links and connections can be made stronger when organisations value lived experience, enable community leadership, and ensure they are flexible and able to adapt to situations as they emerge. Discussions around these barriers and enablers identified three key principles when it comes to community connection:

- (1) Effective community connection requires building relationships around common interests and going beyond activities such as service provision, consultation or campaigning. Creating collective spaces, sharing food, and engaging in cultural activities such as music, faith and sport all build community.
- (2) Organisations employing a strengths-based community development model can build supportive relationships with communities around their aspirations, goals and challenges. This contrasts with the more transactional, paternalistic and charity-oriented models favoured by the sector in the past.
- (3) Organisational structures impact connection to community. Well-designed organisations can bridge the gap by ensuring diversity of experience across leadership and decision-making roles.



Capability Area 3: Systems and Networks

The uneven distribution of the impacts of COVID-19 amongst those already disadvantaged or marginalised is another indication of the complex and systemic nature of these social challenges. Governments are increasingly realising the importance of their role as facilitators across a variety of policy networks that involve various government agencies, industry partners, civil society organisations and communities themselves.

Those who engaged with this research project universally appreciated the value of working collaboratively in networks, noting that this can be enabled by a focus on prioritising relationships, working with intermediaries, and building cultures of learning. At the same time, they identified that the power of networks can break down when one person or group assumes they can *do it all*, when unequal power dynamics go unspoken and unaddressed, and when people approach relationships with overly competitive mindsets.

Discussions around these barriers and enablers identified three key principles when it comes to systems and networks:

- (1) Civil society is stronger when people, communities, and organisations work in collaboration. The challenges facing people and communities often originate within complex systems governed at a distance. No single community, organisation, or even sector can shift these systems alone.
- (2) People and organisations undertake different roles within networks. This includes the need to create and hold spaces for collaboration and learning; to bring people from varying backgrounds into contact with each other; and to encourage action around shared goals.
- (3) Effective collaboration requires resourcing. Sharing experiences, learning from each other, and creating collective agendas for action requires time, money and people. For-purpose sector funders would be well-advised to make these investments.

Capability Area 4: Advocacy and Influence

Most civil society organisations focused on building community strength and resilience aim to reform systemic policies and practices that cause disadvantage or hold problems in place. The tactics that are utilised to achieve these advocacy goals vary widely – from public activities such as media debate, protests and petitions, to more discursive tactics such as research, direct lobbying and being part of policy networks. Civil society leaders that we spoke to highlighted that advocacy is made more difficult by the constraints of funding, acting alone, and trying to communicate the systemic causes of policy problems. They also observed that prioritising impact over tactics, putting people and communities first, and being prepared to act quickly in response to new circumstances were essential components of successfully building and wielding influence. Discussions around these barriers and enablers identified three key principles when it comes to advocacy and influence:

- (1) In a strong democracy, civil society is a crucial avenue for constructive debate that can inform and shift public policy. If governments are overly hostile to feedback and try to stifle dissent, people and organisations can become risk-averse when it comes to challenging entrenched power.
- (2) Advocacy is a strategic and collaborative activity. A clear focus on the desired outcome determines where power needs to be shifted, what relationships need to be built, and what specific tactics could be best employed to create the argument for change.
- (3) It is essential to involve those affected by disadvantage in advocacy. This extends beyond token activities like consultation or using people's stories, to organisational support and respect for community leadership, and deeper involvement in deciding advocacy priorities and strategies.



Recommendations

The ideas and insights in this report originated in the sector itself, often in the rare moments of reflection that civil society leaders found among the chaos and demands of the pandemic. Alongside the specific lessons and new ideas in the four capability areas – leadership, community connection, systems and networks, advocacy and influence – we also offer the following recommendations for those who work in and care for Australian civil society.

For civil society organisations:

- (1) **Organisations should develop or renew their strategies and plans to deepen collaborations and share power with communities beyond the organisation itself.** The strongest and most resilient organisations during COVID-19 have been those with the deepest ties to those they were set up to serve or represent and had consciously focused on relationship and network building as part of their core business.
- (2) **Larger organisations should consider how to share power and resources to create opportunities and platforms for smaller organisations and communities.** The imbalance in power, influence and resources often makes creating and maintaining relationships across networks difficult. Larger and better resourced organisations have an important role to play in creating space and opportunities for smaller organisations and community leadership.

For legislators and policymakers:

- (3) **Encourage advocacy and constructive criticism from across civil society.** Some of the most creative and inspiring moments of the pandemic came when governments listened to the expertise of civil society organisations and communities and innovated accordingly. This highlights the importance of creating an authorising environment where governments and civil society organisations can have honest and difficult public and private conversations.

- (4) **Devolve strategic decision-making to local communities.** Interventions in support of disadvantaged communities are best led by those communities themselves, supported by organisations in close and direct relationship with them. Government at all levels should continue to deepen its work in direct partnership with communities, including delegating authority and decision-making to communities when it is practicable to do so.

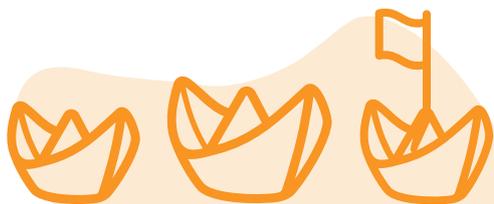
For philanthropists and other funders:

- (5) **Increase funding for intermediaries and hubs.** Intermediary organisations, including community-based hubs, serve to strengthen and sustain important links across networks and communities. Intermediaries introduce people and organisations to each other, provide spaces for resource and information sharing, and can broker strained relationships. Funding this function across civil society would be welcomed and generate significant impact.
- (6) **Increase funding for organisational collaboration and relationship building.** Each of the four civil society capability areas – leadership, community connection, networks and advocacy and influence – is strengthened when organisations are able to collaborate effectively and create deep and sustained relationships. This highlights the need for increased targeted funding towards the skills and practices required to maintain and deepen relationships across time and place.

Civil Society Capabilities

Interconnected skills and focus areas for supporting communities

LEADERSHIP



Strong leaders create relationships across difference, foster leadership in others, and act collectively in response to change.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION



Organisations need to ensure that people are at the forefront of designing and implementing solutions to the challenges they face.



STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

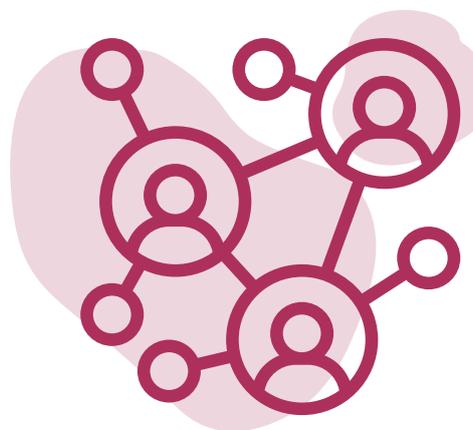


ADVOCACY AND INFLUENCE



Effective advocacy is strategic, collaborative and genuinely involves those affected by disadvantage in all aspects of a campaign.

SYSTEMS AND NETWORKS



Civil society is stronger when people, communities and organisations work in collaboration and build cultures of learning.



Nurturing Links Across Civil Society:

Lessons from Australia's For-Purpose
Sector's Response to COVID-19



Main Report

Introduction

Building the civil society of the 21st century has never been more important. It involves strengthening and agitating existing organisations, as well as creating new institutions. Reflecting on this practice in partnership with others, with the discipline of research partners, can have a long-term benefit to the civil society groups that are essential to our common life and democracy.

Devett Kennedy,
*Queensland Community Alliance*¹

The COVID-19 pandemic, like other crises before it, has forced us all to respond and reflect almost simultaneously. The global need to slow the spread of the virus stopped people in their tracks, shut down whole industries overnight and forced governments to consider unenviable choices between public health and the economy, lives and livelihoods.

Charities, neighbourhood centres, community service providers and other civil society organisations have had to navigate between the wellbeing of their workers and communities needing help. Informal networks and connections that had formed person-to-person around common interests, such as being students or parents, playing the same sport, attending a place of worship, or simply being residents of a particular local area, found their bonds challenged. New demands were also put on organisations, from ensuring that vital services were maintained to making sure people within their community were surviving through the stress of the pandemic.

In Australia, as in many other parts of the world, the pandemic has impacted particularly hard on those already confronted by disadvantage. The experience of the pandemic is, in other words, an experience of inequality. This inequality is seen almost everywhere you look. The health impacts have been particularly felt by people who are older, those with underlying health conditions, by the poor and minority communities. The economic burden has been placed most squarely on people working in jobs that could not be done from home, such as recreation, tourism, hospitality and the arts, many of whom lost their jobs as industries shut down.





The pressure on those who work in frontline essential industries, such as healthcare, education and food distribution, has also often been immense.

In *On Life's Lottery*, Paul Ramsay Foundation CEO Glyn Davis suggests that the ongoing unequal distribution of suffering onto those who struggle economically underscores the myth of Australian meritocracy:

Entrenched intergenerational poverty, like the property of the wealthy, is handed down from parent to child. For the poorest in our society, social mobility is highly constrained. Each time the lottery [of life] plays, the same results emerge. Most will do well but for more than one in ten Australians a lifetime of economic struggle beckons.

Glyn Davis, Paul Ramsay Foundation²

Much has been written worldwide about the contrasting public policy responses to the pandemic. The crucial role played by non-government and non-profit organisations has been less widely investigated, however. Nonetheless, from helping policymakers to develop national policy responses to delivering meals to people's doors, it is clear that civil

society has played a fundamental role during the pandemic. From the largest advocacy organisation mobilising thousands on an international stage, to the smallest community group made up of residents in a small town, our society has long been underpinned by people coming together around common purpose and never has that been clearer than during the pandemic.

But how has that role been performed? That is what our research set out to discover.

For the past 18 months, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team has been exploring the nuances of Australia's response to COVID-19. The aim has been to understand the core capabilities which civil society leaders and organisations can prioritise in order to better represent and serve the needs and aspirations of the communities of which they are a part.

Through an extensive series of conversations, workshops and public events, the initiative has engaged with hundreds of people and organisations across the country. Passionate leaders come from various communities based around geography, identity and faith: from organisations that call themselves not-for-profit, non-government, for-purpose, charitable or philanthropic; to people who think of themselves as advocates, organisers,

researchers, managers, facilitators of service providers. Regardless of their backgrounds or the size of the organisation they work or volunteer for, or what their formal role is, we refer to those we have talked to as our civil society leaders.

The Strengthening Australian Civil Society team was struck instantly by the fact that the passion and enthusiasm of civil society leaders extended well beyond the activities of their individual organisations or communities. They expressed a profound desire to revive Australia's democratic culture through an ongoing process of respectful dialogue, reflection, and learning. This desire sits in the widening void between everyday people and formal politics, between citizens and the public institutions their forebears made, striking at essential questions around belonging, inequality and power.

This report is structured around a series of themes that the research team has identified as crucial to strengthening civil society in Australia. In particular, the team has been investigating the ability of civil society to:

- (1) Develop sophisticated approaches to leadership that recognise and encourage emerging leaders within communities (**leadership**).
- (2) Create stronger connections with the people and communities that they aim to support, serve and advocate for (**community connection**).
- (3) Build strong and collaborative networks centred on community need that can overcome systemic challenges and complex problems (**systems and networks**).
- (4) Generate the broad-based power and influence required to advocate effectively and create change (**advocacy and influence**).

The substantive chapters in this report explore these four capability areas in turn. Grounded in the latest thinking from around the world, initial discussions with civil society leaders revealed barriers and enablers in all of the capability areas – factors which either helped or hindered people and organisations from working in the ways they said they wanted to. Further discussion revealed important principles in each of the capability areas, which could contribute to stronger and more effective links across civil society.

These principles for a stronger civil society are grounded in a central theme – that the links woven through collective and collaborative action are civil society's greatest strength, and civil society is strongest when people, communities and organisations are oriented towards the interests of those most in need of support.

The exploration of the four capability areas in this report is brought to life with stories. From short anecdotes and insights to longer examinations of how particular communities were impacted by and responded to the pandemic, these stories provide crucial entry points and context for the broader concepts, questions and principles that emerge. They help to dig beneath the conflict-driven headlines and publicity-inspired self-promotion that dominates Australian public discourse. They tell complex tales of success and failure, the messy and hard work of civil society and democracy in action. We have seen old and new leaders rise to the challenge, networks pull together to cushion the impacts on those around them, already vulnerable communities struggle to have their voices heard, and people fall through the gaps where we had let the thread of our links wear thin.

For those of us who live and work in Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived quick on the heels of another crisis – the devastating bushfires of the summer of 2019-20. Scientists have been warning us that environmental disasters will become more common as the planet continues to heat; experts predict that we will be feeling the social, economic and mental health ramifications of COVID-19 for years to come; people continue to flee danger and persecution, hoping for a better life for their children.

As one crisis settles over the top of another, we will need to better understand how to live and work with crisis while trying to prepare for a better future. We will need to get better at acknowledging and talking about our mistakes and failures, along with appreciating our successes and wins. We will need to listen to First Nations leaders when they say Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been living in crisis since colonisation and have much to offer non-Indigenous Australians about how to live in harmony with Country and each other.



It is vital that we grab the essential opportunity that COVID-19 has offered to reflect, learn and where necessary change course. This requires us to simultaneously understand where we are, work out where we want to be and take bold steps in the spaces in between. Through this project, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative is endeavouring to hold open spaces for these conversations to occur, in strategic partnership with the Paul Ramsay Foundation and in collaboration with hundreds of civil society leaders across the country.

This report is a public milestone representing the collective wisdom of that collaboration to date. We hope you find its contents useful in developing the skills and capabilities you need to make a real difference in people's lives.

We invite you to engage with us on these ideas, and in future collaborations.

I Method and Approach

The Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team, based at the Sydney Policy Lab, is inspired by the best traditions in participatory methods. The Sydney Policy Lab employs a *relational* approach to research, working from the assumption that insights and outcomes are strongest when they are underpinned by genuine connections between all of those involved in the research process.

When it comes to generating knowledge and new ideas, a relational approach involves creating and holding spaces for people to connect across difference. Researchers support people and organisations to identify and then explore the questions and ideas that matter to them. The process of that exploration is crucially important. A successful relational research project has the capacity to transform everyone involved, bringing people together across difference to create powerful new ideas and relationships for change.

The Lab's relational approach draws on a diverse range of practices, influences, and ideas. Academic comparisons can be made to other relationship-centred practices, such as co-design, co-production, collaborative ethnography and participatory action research. Originally inspired by the community organising techniques of the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Sydney Policy Lab's relational approach has evolved, and will continue to evolve,

as the practices are tested through collaboration and applied to specific contexts, including through exposure to Indigenous research methodologies and through ambitious projects, such as Strengthening Australian Civil Society.

Discussions around this research project began well before COVID-19. Across the course of 2018 and 2019, conversations between the Sydney Policy Lab and Paul Ramsay Foundation revealed a keen interest in exploring civil society capability – from the Lab's point of view, building on previous collaborations with Sydney's Wayside Chapel, the Sydney Alliance and a coalition of NSW-based community sector peak organisations;³ from the Paul Ramsay Foundation's point of view, there is a desire to understand how to better support and fund the numerous for-purpose organisations that they support across the country.

The pandemic changed the context of the project, but not its focal point. Drawing on leading current thinking on the nature of civil society, the research team explored major questions about civil society





capability through four distinct lenses: (1) differing styles of leadership; (2) strategies used to maintain connectedness to community; (3) the importance of place-based and broader organisational networks; and (4) the ability to effectively influence professional decision makers. If anything, responding to the social, health and economic pressures of COVID-19 put the business as usual of Australian civil society under the microscope, testing the general capacity and capabilities of people and organisations to respond to community need.

Working collaboratively through a series of focus groups, interviews and discussion papers, the research process was designed to enable civil society leaders to share their own insights into the capacity of civil society to act for the common good and identify potential future trends. This approach to examining the effectiveness of Australian civil society organisations was intended to create distinctive and original insights for broader dissemination, as well as generating a subsequent research agenda around for-purpose sector capability beyond the pandemic.

To guide this work, the Sydney Policy Lab and the Paul Ramsay Foundation convened an Advisory Panel of experienced international and Australia practitioners from across a broad range of civil society. The panel includes people with varied experience across community-led organisations and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; community organisers coordinating successful advocacy campaigns and running nationwide government programs; people with experience at some of Australia's largest non-government organisations; and others who have created successful organisations from the ground up.

The initial research phase ran from September 2020 until February 2021. Participants were recruited for their expertise in and around Australia's for-purpose sector, primarily from the strong established networks of the Sydney Policy Lab and the Paul Ramsay Foundation. As people began engaging with the research, for example through joining the Advisory Panel, the range of participants grew as more people heard about and wanted to engage with the work. This initial phase included 42 semi-structured in-depth interviews,

Advisory Panel

each of approximately one hour in duration, seven intimate online two-hour focus groups attended by a total of 43 people from 35 different organisations exploring different capability areas; and three public discussion events attended by a total of 457 people. In sum, the initiative engaged with close to 600 civil society leaders over a six-month period, each and every one of them interested in building relationships, sharing knowledge and developing skills. Participating people and organisations can be found as an appendix to this document.

The second phase of the research involved drawing out the core themes and ideas from these conversations, supported by the Advisory Panel and a select group of experts and practitioners from across the country. These themes required secondary research across a variety of capability areas, digging deeper into emerging best practice across the globe. At a two-day online meeting in early August 2021, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team convened a *Review of Reviews*, where 31 civil society leaders scrutinised Strengthening Australian Civil Society's interim findings, set out in five major review papers – one for each of the capability areas and relating to the broad question of *What does civil society mean in Australia?* Participants in the *Review of Reviews* responded to provocations drawn from factors which they felt either supported or got in the way of their efforts to serve and represent community need.

This process resulted in the crystallisation of the principles for civil society capability explored in-depth in this document, as well as the central theme of the importance of nurturing links across civil society. From this, we published an initial statement of principles around civil society capability. We plan that these principles will guide the next phase of the Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative's work to support and strengthen Australian civil society. These ideas were tested with participants in the *Review of Reviews* before being released as a three-page *Public Communique* as a preview of the content of this report.

In designing research and engagement with civil society leaders, the team has focused on trying to genuinely listen, building the kind of relationships that are needed to sustain a long-term community



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of practice. We have intentionally not attempted to generate quantitative empirical data. In part, that is because such quantitative work has already been well-conducted by others. But it is also because deep conversations with those who have been on the frontline of civil society's response to COVID-19 may well reveal crucial lessons that are obscured by survey results or formal analysis alone.

The team's ambition is to reveal what the American anthropologist James C. Scott once called the "hidden transcripts" of everyday life and practice.⁴ We wish, in other words, to tap into the conversations that go on between trusted colleagues in the everyday life of civil society organisations as they grapple with extraordinarily difficult issues that may not often be shared publicly. Research efforts to recreate those conversations can only ever be partial, but they are nonetheless worth pursuing because more can be learnt from attending to these qualitative findings than from quantitative studies alone.

This is a demanding and difficult task, and the research team is conscious already of some of the places where we have fallen short of our own good intentions and remain open to others telling us what we could do better. Through this work, building genuine relationships and trust takes time. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations have not been engaged nearly enough. Additionally, the research team's networks have also been stronger in some parts of civil society than others. More work remains to be done, for example, to connect effectively with representative bodies that are made up of and run by people with experience of big social challenges, such as racism, disability and poverty, as well as those working at the forefront of two of the biggest challenges of our time – inequality and climate change.

The Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team does not see its role as extracting information and providing answers for people. Rather, the aim is to create and hold spaces where conversations can occur, where people can come together and share, where people can fail and learn without fear of being cancelled, where people find common cause and commit to working together. The Strengthening Australian Civil Society team

is trying, imperfectly, to act out of a place of reflective equilibrium – an ongoing process of creating spaces for meaningful conversations, then sharing with people what we have heard.

In that spirit, this report is not a destination, but the beginning of an ongoing relationship.



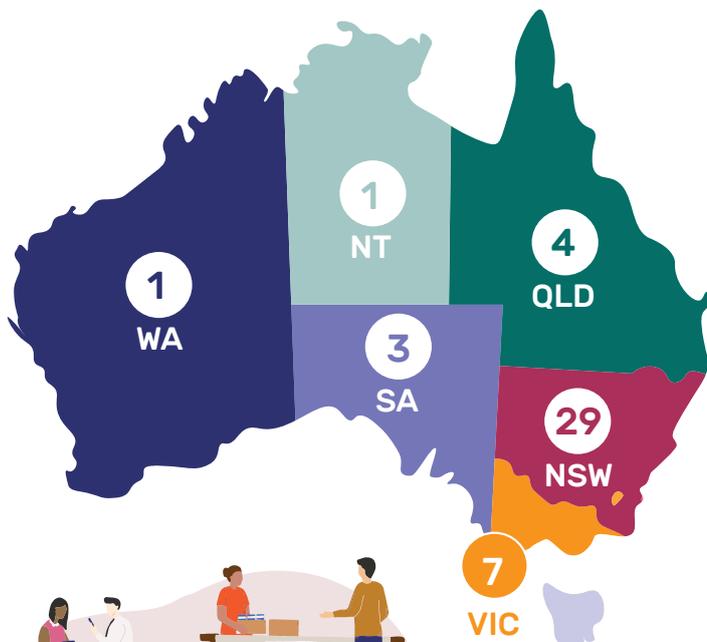
We spoke to 105 people from 87 organisations

Types of organisations

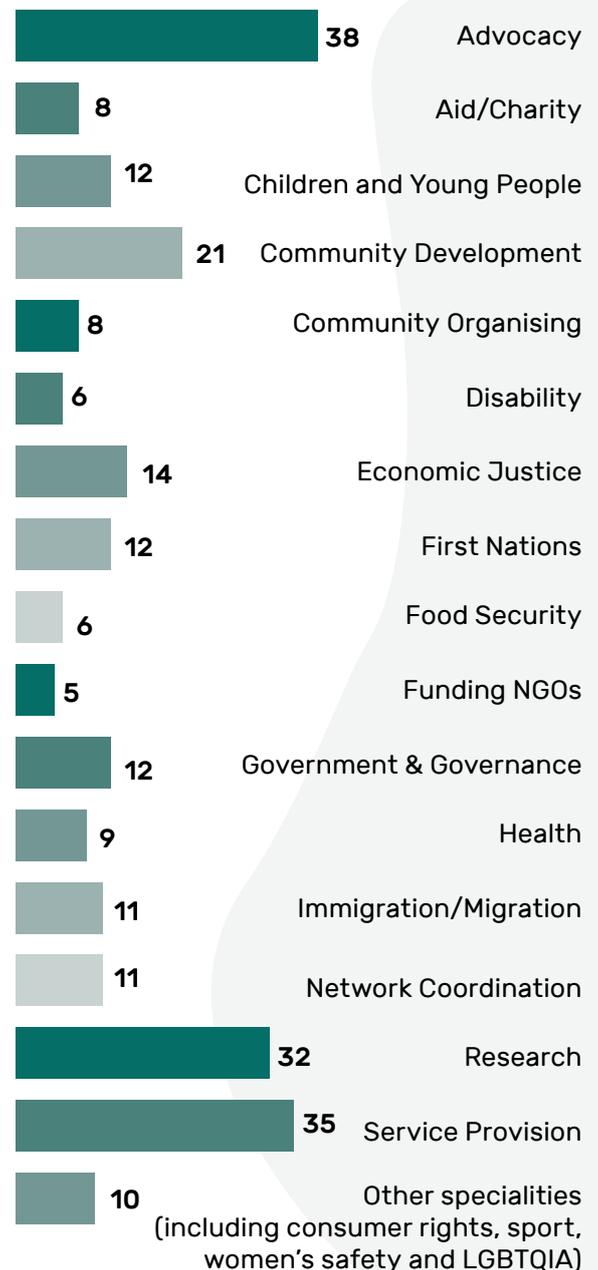


Where do they do most of their work?

55 AUSTRALIA WIDE
3 INTERNATIONAL



And the people we spoke with, and the organisations they work for, specialise in a variety of areas:



We organised a total of 22 public events that engaged with over 850 people

We read over 350 pieces of literature





I Civil Society in Australia

One of the challenges of Strengthening Australian Civil Society has been to take a broad and inclusive view of exactly what civil society is, what it has been, and what it could be. This is no simple task.

Asking a hundred people to define civil society would likely generate close to a hundred different answers. Some might think about different types of formal *organisations* that deliver services or advocate for social change, such as non-government, not-for-profit, and for-purpose organisations. Some might think within categories, such as charities, advocacy organisations and service providers. Others think of civil society as a *third sector*, distinct from the market or the state, where activities occur for purposes other than for business or governing society. Some might think of civil society as large *institutions* that sit outside markets or governments, like organised religion, the arts, sport, trade unions, the media and even universities.

With so many different ideas about what civil society is, there should be little wonder people

might feel disconnected from it or policymakers fail to take it seriously enough. This presents a fundamental problem – a strong civil society is regarded as an essential component of a strong democracy.

Many participants in this research project have wondered whether what they do “fits in” with Australian civil society. This has been particularly true of people who have organised and acted outside the boundaries of larger NGOs, or through organisational structures not defined by legislation as not-for-profit. Some participants have expressed discomfort with the phrase “civil society,” because the people and communities they worked with had troubled and conflicted relationships with large service providers and traditional institutions. Like in many other settler-colonial societies, religious and other non-government organisations have played a significant role in perpetuating and reinforcing state injustices against First Nations peoples. For some, the word “civil” brings with it the pain of one civilisation believing they have the right to impose their culture and practices on another.



Other people saw themselves as trying to bring the organisations that they were working with towards a focus on “collective purpose” or “common good”, either for their own neighbourhood, identity group or the wider nation. They have felt that over time some organisations have drifted inadvertently from their initial purpose and “lost their way” by embracing a more formalised, technocratic way of working. They have seen money play a crucial role in this transformation. Some people pointed to the wave of Australian community organisations forming in the 1960s, 70s and 80s off the back of social justice, feminist and environmental movements, and how changes in the way these organisations have been funded, publicly and privately, have affected how management prioritised their activities. Some noted how a number of organisations which had initially formed from people coming together around identifiable common activities – sporting associations, unions, charities, faith-based bodies – had since

commercialised and institutionalised to the extent that they had stepped away from their “roots” and were unwilling to advocate for their shared concerns or take a stand on controversial issues.

Questions concerning the “authenticity” or “independence” of civil society have, of course, long been part of the definitional debate. One key starting question for a theoretical debate around civil society almost always concerns its relationship to government or the state.⁵ The French nineteenth century liberal thinker Alexis de Tocqueville travelled to the United States in its early years and wrote about a vibrant civil society as a counterbalance to the threat of state authoritarianism. On the other hand, the 20th century Italian social critic Antonio Gramsci, imprisoned by the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, saw civil society as often working in tandem with the state, arguing that it often plays a role in reinforcing the dominance of a ruling class. Both perspectives can be seen in the history

of Australian democracy. We might think of how workers came together at the Eureka Stockade to challenge the power of the state,⁶ but also the way in which many Christian missionaries and charities assisted government in removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities across the Stolen Generations.⁷

This scholarly debate has intensified in more recent years. The American political scientist Robert Putnam has spent the last three decades insisting that the important horizontal bonds that people create, often in voluntary organisations, build the social capital and trust that are fundamental to the functioning of a healthy democracy. He has also contended that these bonds are currently at risk in many advanced democracies.⁸ More recently, Harvard Professor Danielle Allen has highlighted the importance of bridging relationships across civil society, which connect people together across difference so that they can come to understand the perspectives of people other than themselves.⁹ In policy circles these ideas have found increasing relevance too. The UK-based think-tank New Local suggested that advanced democracies are now entering the era of a “community paradigm”. This follows a state-dominated era that saw the establishment of the welfare state following the Second World War and the market paradigm which emerged in the last few decades of the 20th century, where private companies increasingly replaced public service providers.¹⁰

In Australia, these debates have been complicated by the fact that significant public funding is often provided to non-government service providers, raising questions as to the independence of these organisations from the state.¹¹ Some scholarly critics have wondered whether Australian civil society is capable of playing the role called for by Putnam, Allen or New Local, given that many Australian civil society organisations are often more explicitly reliant on government for financial support than their equivalents elsewhere and that this financial support often comes with strings attached, either explicitly or implicitly.¹²

At the same time, Australian scholar Ariadne Vromen has shown that Australia’s advocacy sector also has large independent organisations which actively campaign publicly against government

policy, often in a highly politically-charged and oppositional manner.¹³ This raises questions about a potential disconnect across Australian civil society, between organisations which actively criticise government but do not have the relationships to negotiate the details of substantive change, and those which have relationships with government but are unwilling to effectively stand up to them. Getting the balance right between these *insider* and *outsider* strategies, either within individual organisations or across coalitions, is widely considered vital for effective advocacy.

In responding to these challenges and considering their positions, the leaders to whom the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team spoke to overwhelmingly saw COVID-19 as presenting an opportunity for Australian civil society to come to a stronger sense of self-understanding. Across interviews and focus groups, researchers heard multiple calls for civil society groups, both big and small, to reconnect with “purpose”. For some, the pandemic provided an opportunity to put aside their everyday concerns and focus squarely on how they conceived their fundamental contribution to the “common good”.





An Orientation Towards the Common Good

Three themes have appeared across many of these conversations concerning the purpose of Australian civil society. *First*, the research team has frequently heard that a core characteristic of civil society organisations is that their primary motivation is “community service” rather than the pursuit of profit, income, wealth or power. *Second*, there is a strong sense that civil society groups are at their best when they do more than merely ameliorate bad situations and react to crises. Rather, civil society is defined by its ability to address structural, fundamental or systemic failings that can perpetuate disadvantage and injustice over time. *Third*, and perhaps most importantly, civil society is most effective when it actively works to build *links* with people, communities and each other, working *collectively and collaboratively* to challenge unhealthy conditions.

Taken together, these three characteristics reveal a fundamental aspect of the way in which civil society leaders conceive the sector which they operate in. ***Crucially, they see civil society as defined by its core principles and purpose, rather than through any specific function that they provide or organisational type they represent.*** Participating Australian civil society leaders overwhelmingly understood their sector as being defined by an orientation towards “community”. Civil society organisations enable people to gather for a common purpose beyond material self-interest or political advantage and they help support people to act together around their own shared interests, especially in the long-term.

Seen this way, civil society is seen as fundamentally distinct from a *market orientation* – where the aim of an organisation is to generate revenue and promote economic activity – or a *state orientation*, where the purpose is to compete for power, in order to set a policy agenda, to legislate or to govern using the formal institutions of the state. Instead, the aim of civil society – this *community orientation* – is to facilitate, resource and support voluntary collective activity around shared interests for the long-term common good. Crucially, the outcome of a community orientation lies as much in the social capital it generates, in

the form of trust, stronger relationships and more resilient communities, as it does of any specific service it provides. The American-based political thinker, Bonnie Honig, visited Sydney at the start of this project and reflected on this idea at the Wayside Chapel. She rooted it in the thinking of Hannah Arendt:

 ***This is an Arendtian idea: when we join with others in care for the world, our action in concert with diverse others generates collective power and brings with it the pleasure of appearing in the world with others in common cause.***

Bonnie Honig, Brown University¹⁴

Compelling though it is, such a definitional approach does have pitfalls. It can appear messy. It is hard to quantify or put a dollar value to. It may also be hard to analyse, direct or control. However, for many participants this is the way it should be and they are far from alone in this view. In 2018, the UK's landmark Civil Society Futures project, chaired by Dame Julia Unwin, which engaged over 1,000 civil society organisations across the UK, presented a similarly broad interpretation. It concluded:

 ***Civil society involves all of us. When we act not for profit nor because the law requires us to, but out of love or anger or creativity, or principle, we are civil society. When we bring together our friends or colleagues or neighbours to have fun or to defend our rights or to look after each other, we are civil society.***

Whether we organise through informal friendship networks, Facebook groups, community events and protests; or formal committees, charities, faiths and trade unions, whether we block runways or co-ordinate coffee mornings, sweat round charity runs or make music for fun; when we organise ourselves outside the market and the state, we are all civil society.¹⁵

Approaching civil society as a value, idea or orientation, and contrasting it with a market or a state orientation, enables us to look at crucial questions in a new way. This perspective enables us, for example, to analyse questions of power. The market, the state and civil society all have a relationship to power. An extremely simplified view of power might be that it is “the ability to act.”¹⁶ If you can take action on something, you have power over it. Political theorist Steven Lukes suggested that a more nuanced unpacking of this might be that there are different types of power: the power to make someone do something, to stop them from doing something, the power to set an agenda and the power to influence people's underlying views and mindsets.¹⁷ Similarly, digital activists and authors Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms argued that hierarchical power concentrated in an individual draws its strength from the use of force or an entitlement like divine intervention, delegated responsibility or even from popular vote. Distributed power across a network draws its strength from a multiplicity of connections and relationships that are independent yet in relationship from each other.¹⁸

A market orientation sees power in *wealth* – the more money you have, the more power you have and the more you personally can do what you want. A state orientation sees power in *control* – in a democracy, people in various ways delegate power to make and implement decisions. A community orientation, in contrast, builds power through *relationships* – whether to create a team that can compete in a regional football competition, or to raise money from thousands of small donations to support a local women's shelter, or to organise and mobilise voters to put different people in government. One of the key differences between these orientations is that market and state orientations tend to concentrate power on a small number of individuals, while community orientation distributes power across a much larger group of people.

Similarly, this idea of civil society being a community orientation helps us make sense of how a range of organisations and actors in Australian life can be distinguished from another. With this idea we can look at the actions of a service provider or a community group, a political party or a news media outlet, and think about which way they are primarily orientated: are they primarily focused on generating profit, implementing policies or building community? A local activist group, for example, might require money to print resources and need to develop relationships in order for their local MP to take them seriously, yet their primary focus is to create policy change – this would be called a state orientation. A social enterprise might create an online platform allowing people to network effectively and provide tools for lobbying politicians, yet they have a history of underpaying employees and are unconcerned about where revenue comes from, as long as it keeps increasing – a market orientation. A service provider is continually applying for government and philanthropic grants and frequently lobbies politicians around legislative change, yet their governing board includes the kinds of people who make use of the services provided, who help design the organisation's activities and determine the strategic direction – a community orientation.

This might sound straightforward, but in practice, the distinctions can sometimes be hard to maintain. What about a political organisation whose primary purpose is to build and support the creation of a network of activists? Or a campaigning group that has become so obsessed with fundraising that the advocacy they do is practically superfluous? How do we define a philanthropic organisation that works behind the scenes for a decade to support a community-led initiative to achieve their aspirations? Or the one that offers to take on the funding of a struggling public agency as long as the government makes certain legislative and policy changes? With government funding, are the activities of a community service provider based upon an orientation towards the state, market, or the community?

These questions are important. The direction in which civil society is headed, consciously or otherwise, adds purpose to their activities. If civil society organisations end up somewhere

other than where they wanted to be, it can give a sense of the power that they might be pulling against. Someone might be standing in a public park, looking at the sky and wanting to fly, but the pure gravitational force of the Earth's magnetic pull means they are not getting more than a foot off the ground without some serious assistance. In the same way, a community service provider might really want to engage deeply with their local community and design service interventions based on this engagement, but to keep receiving government or philanthropic funding they need to deliver a particular service and maintain forensic records, meaning they do not have enough resources to genuinely engage and build relationships with the people that they need to. For various reasons, good intentions do not always result in good actions. And so, we begin posing the questions that structure and influence our research and findings.





The Questions that Follow

If civil society is an orientation of the kind described above, it has the capacity to lift citizens above the polarised and oppositional culture of the present which many agree dominates conventional political debate. Moreover, civil society may well appear to be the best response to some of the distinctive challenges the pandemic has generated. The mental health impacts of COVID-19, for example, reveal the fundamental role of social connection in human wellbeing, and it may well be that civil society is better positioned to enhance social connection in comparison to the state or the market. The importance of connection and community comes through in COVID-19 success stories where people and communities have found new and innovative ways to stay connected, made new connections, and have done their best to ensure people in their orbit got the help and assistance they required.

Reflecting on these possibilities and on the issues raised by the Advisory Panel and others, the research team structured the questions for participants around a series of themes that are crucial to civil society's capability.

In particular, we investigated the ability of those across Australian civil society to:

- (1) promote a new style of leadership that fosters emerging new leaders within communities;
- (2) build stronger relationships with the people and communities that they claim to serve, support and for whom they advocate;
- (3) reach out to and collaborate with each other, building strong relational networks that support their community-creating aspirations, and
- (4) wield power and advocate in a manner that is effective but also reduces polarisation and community division.

From these themes have sprung a series of stories, insights and observations that are explored across the rest of this report, accompanied by a series of principles that they generate. While Australian civil society's collective response to COVID-19 was the focal point for the conversations, the results show that civil society leaders understand that, as monumental as the pandemic has been, the challenge and importance of reorienting public attention towards community has been building for some time before the pandemic. What COVID-19 may have done, however, is help us understand that we cannot wait for the right time.

I Civil Society Capabilities

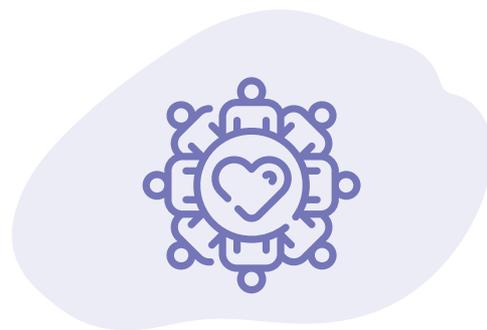
How can we build a more powerful and re-energised civil society? What does this require of people who work in non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations, people who are active in their communities, or that invest through philanthropy, or want to provide support in government?

In trying to answer these questions, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team has looked to the ambition of people and organisations to orientate towards the needs and interests of communities. The research has focused on the abundance of skills and capabilities in civil society itself, and the communities with which it works, particularly when civil society acts collectively and collaboratively.

Four capability areas are explored in the following section: leadership, community connection, systems and networks, and advocacy and influence. They explore the broad questions:



Are ideas changing about what leadership means?



How do we listen to the communities we represent and serve?



How do we collaborate and coordinate effectively?



What does it mean to effectively create change?

After contextualising these capabilities within COVID-19 and key ideas from leading scholars, each main section explores factors which get in the way of or enable people and organisations developing and exercising skills in these areas. These lead to three core principles to support civil society capability.

Before diving into these capability areas, we present the first of four “COVID-19 stories”, short case studies of the pandemic where these capability areas can be seen in action.



Responses to COVID-19 from Australia's First Nations

This COVID-19 story highlights the strength and versatility that can come from community leadership, particularly when part of a broader network that takes its lead from community-controlled organisations. It also demonstrates that, if unaddressed, flaws in larger and more powerful systems can eventually undermine and weaken the impact of strong local networks.

In April 2021, public health expert Rachel Pannett, writing in the Washington Post, noted that keeping the 2020 wave of COVID-19 out of Australia's First Nations communities, despite high levels of

vulnerability, was "probably the best evidence we have that if you put Aboriginal people in charge, then you get better outcomes."¹ Yet sadly, by the second half of 2021, COVID-19's virulent Delta strain had begun to reach into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in regional and remote parts of NSW. The strength of community connection and leadership amongst Australia's First Nations peoples could only go so far in mitigating Australia's lack of public health preparedness for the 2021 outbreak. Systemic forces outside of individual and community control meant that a small cluster in the eastern suburbs of Sydney

eventually reached regional and remote parts of the country, where vaccination rates were lower than in metropolitan areas, and residents had less access to community and public health facilities.

The structural disadvantages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities already face in terms of health, education, justice and housing ensured that COVID-19 pandemic posed considerable dangers for First Nations peoples in Australia. Around 50 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults suffer from a chronic health condition, automatically predisposing them to more severe cases of COVID-19; one in eight live in overcrowded housing, making the rapid spread of the disease a real possibility.² National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) Chair Donella Mills observed in a Strengthening Australian Civil Society focus group that, while the virus “does not discriminate, disadvantage ensures the impact falls upon the most vulnerable.”³

In the early days of the pandemic, the strength of Aboriginal-led civil society organisations and leadership across the Aboriginal community helped galvanise local and national First Nations leaders to reach out to government, summon the local knowledge of those working in remote communities, and forge ahead with appropriate safety measures to minimise risk. National advocacy organisation, the First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN), for example, partnered with the tertiary sector to consider how First Nations peoples with a disability would be prioritised if there was a broader outbreak of COVID-19 amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.⁴

NACCHO, representing 143 Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations across the country, played a crucial intermediary role between government and local communities:

 ***In early March (2020), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 was established. NACCHO co-chairs this Advisory Group. It links to the Communicable Diseases Network of Australia and reports to***

the Australian Protection Principal Committee. But what was just as important was that our services were on the ground. Informing communities early on about the facts. Supporting communities with local pandemic planning. Using social media, radio and local leaders to spread the word. Solving problems like soap in schools, new rules for business, or working out how to ensure medications got to people in quarantine.

Pat Turner, NACCHO⁵

NACCHO ensured that the Federal Government Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 was guided by the principles of “shared decision-making, power sharing, two-way communication, self-determination, leadership and empowerment.”⁶ Governments listening to the wishes of local organisations saw the imposition of restrictions on visitors to rural and remote communities. Health services coordinated to contemplate what resources, such as quarantine facilities, mobile testing clinics and foodstuffs would be needed if there was a serious outbreak.⁷ Community-appropriate and relevant communications provided important health information about the symptoms of COVID-19, best practices for minimising the risk of infection, and the locations of testing clinics.⁸

Two of the many local community-led organisations at work during the 2020 phase of COVID-19 were the Maranguka Community Hub in Bourke, NSW, and the Nawarddeken Academy in West Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.⁹ The Maranguka team quickly engaged with “frontline government services, the police and non-government agencies” to deliver meals and food hampers to those in need, and support Elders, as part of their ongoing work to “create shared understandings and new connections” across the community. The Nawarddeken Academy, a bilingual and bicultural school, shifted gears from educating kids to supporting the broader community. Racing against a travel shutdown, the small team swiftly coordinated a food shipment to prepare for a long closure and brought community members home

from other parts of the country on a specially chartered flight.

The initial response from Australia's First Nations communities to the pandemic and the comparatively low levels of impact on community members drew significant media attention, particularly in comparison to the USA, where Native Americans were dying "at a faster rate than any other group in the United States."¹⁰ Mary Brigg and Mary Graham, scholars specialising in Aboriginal history and comparative philosophy, noted that "amidst the coronavirus pandemic we have seen the operation of a generalised sense of responsibility to others manifesting what might be termed a law of mutual obligation."¹¹ According to Teela Reid, a lawyer who was deeply involved in efforts to support Elders in Gilgandra, a small rural town in NSW, "the ways in which many communities acted was through the natural instinct to be a survivor and to protect elders."¹²

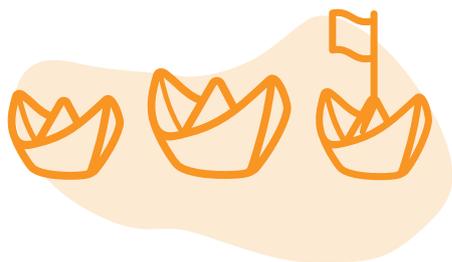
By August 2021, the virulent Delta strain of COVID-19 had a serious impact on First Nations communities, particularly in Western NSW, driven by systemic factors which communities and other experts had been warning governments about for months.¹³ Relative to population size, the remote town of Wilcannia, where a funeral became a superspreading event, had the highest proportion of COVID-19 cases in NSW. This was fuelled by factors like a lack of appropriate health facilities, families living close together, and a lack of trust in government. Wilcannia residents and workers told the BBC that "this shouldn't have reached us," noting that, contrary to community advice, government had not closed outside access to the community when it was asked for, and had, in their view, only developed a COVID-19 response plan that "catered to suburban Sydney."¹⁴

As the Delta strain snaked through Australia and cases rose amongst Aboriginal communities, particularly amongst young people, rather than talk about successes it may be more important to consider what can be learned from the strength of Australia's First Nations civil society leaders and organisations. Strong community connection, leadership and networks can only go so far to mitigate the clearly significant structural barriers facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

and communities. And at the end of the day, as Donnella Mills explained, "*successes* is not the way we would describe our wins in this colony. Our wins have been extremely hard fought, highly sophisticated, and born from the deep lived experiences that we bring to the table."¹⁵

Writing in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in September 2020, April Nishimura et al. noted how groups facing "systemic racial disparities and biases" can successfully agitate for change from the ground up.¹⁶ This is necessarily a relational practice, "bringing together multiple forms of knowledge, with practices that nurtured the humility to ask for help and be in collaborative and interdependent relationships with new people."¹⁷ The response of First Nations peoples in Australia to COVID-19 demonstrated dispersed democratic leadership in action. No single individual or organisation dominated. Existing networks from the community to the highest levels of government were mobilised. Local expertise was utilised, with communities taking the lead on designing the responses to their unique challenges. And yet, the challenge clearly remains to elevate community-led practices to the point where they can have more impact on the broader systems and structures they are part of.





LEADERSHIP

I Capability Area 1: Leadership

Non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations can play an important leadership role in society, breaking down entrenched power structures and systemic disadvantage for the benefit of people and communities. If we think about leadership as a skill that can be developed, rather than a position that is inherited or bestowed, we start to ask important questions such as: How does civil society avoid getting stuck in old ways of working, losing sight of the bigger picture? How can relationships be forged across difference? And how can leadership be best fostered in others?

Introduction

Leadership has been in great demand since the COVID-19 pandemic began. We do not need to look far to see examples of leadership in action: scientists and health experts trying to understand and contain the virus, political leaders attempting to make tough decisions to meet emerging social and economic need, and community members stepping up to support their neighbours in times of crisis.

Leadership during COVID-19 has come in various forms across civil society too. People leading organisations needed to weigh up their responsibilities to the staff and the communities they serve. Public events needed to be cancelled or moved online. People needed to transition to working from home and find new ways to do tasks which had been done face-to-face. Long-planned projects and strategies needed to be completely rethought and resources reprioritised.

 **The COVID crisis has accentuated the need for leaders. Four things I've admired are: decisive action; compassion; consultation; and trusting science.**

Clinton Free, Director, Executive Education, University of Sydney¹

Leadership emerged, in particular, in mutual aid activities - people getting together to "form collectives with neighbours to help each other

without the usual incentives."² Often organised via social media, Australians worked with small businesses like chemists and local bakeries to collect and distribute food and health supplies to people stuck at home. In well-publicised public events like the Melbourne Towers lockdown, community members worked behind the scenes to help each other. Civil society strategist Anita Tang observed this as "examples of people without positional leadership leading," coming "from places that are separate from what we might think of as formal civil society."³

Recent scholarship on leadership increasingly conceives it as a *practice* rather than a *position*. In his celebrated *The Powers to Lead*, Joseph Nye suggested that we are in an era of *post-heroic leadership*, where effective leadership "depends less on the heroic actions of a few individuals at the top and more on collaborative leadership practices distributed throughout an organisation."⁴ Competitiveness, positional authority and demand-oriented behaviour involving threats or conventional incentives is replaced by collaboration, distributed leadership, and encouraging collective participation. According to Nye, among the complex and interconnected systems and networks, "hierarchical, command-and-control approaches simply do not work anymore. They impede information flows inside companies, hampering the fluid and collaborative nature of work today."⁵

Along these lines, three intersecting approaches to modern leadership capability are *adaptive leadership*, *systems leadership* and *cross-sector leadership*, all of which emphasise the need to lead in complex contexts. Broad capabilities across these include ongoing and continuous learning and conversation, keeping an eye on "the big picture" to anticipate future trends, clear communication and articulation of collective vision and goals, and a focus on long-term impact as opposed to solely short-term responsiveness.⁶ In these contexts, a crucial factor recognised as contributing to why collaboration falls short is "because they failed to foster collective leadership within and across the collaborating organisations."⁷ Similarly, celebrated community organiser and Harvard academic

Marshall Ganz described leadership “as accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty. Leaders accept responsibility not only for their individual ‘part’ of the work, but also for the collective ‘whole’.”⁸

Many aspects of leading in complex environments overlap with conditions of crises like COVID-19. As Ben Ramalingam et al. noted in the *Harvard Business Review*, situations are “constantly evolving, with leaders facing unpredictability, imperfect information, multiple unknowns, and the need to identify responses quickly – all while recognising the multi-dimensional (health-related, economic, social, political, cultural) nature of the crisis.”⁹ For Nye, leaders should view crises as an opportunity for change, relaxing “the normal constraints that limit their power and action.”¹⁰ Here, the ability to remain calm in high stress environments becomes critical, for both decision-making and communicating with others. Such moments of crisis do create some pressure towards a more concentrated system of leadership, with reliance on the “person at the top” to make key decisions swiftly and implement them effectively. However, they also generate pressure towards a more distributed, collaborative leadership style, with a need to avoid “groupthink” and to seize on the “greater creativity of a more diverse group.”¹¹

As we move further out of the immediate crisis into our new conditions of a post-COVID-19 world, funders, decision makers, change makers and community members all have a vested interest in understanding what leadership is and how to cultivate and develop it across society.

Over the past year, through interactions with hundreds of civil society leaders across Australia and beyond about their experiences with COVID-19, Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers have heard stories of how people and organisations have been striving to lead during the pandemic.

Based on this research and academic learnings, this chapter offers insights into three barriers identified in academic research and by civil society leaders that are holding people, communities and organisations back from leading more effectively: failing to see the bigger picture, being consumed by

operational matters and path dependency. It then identifies three areas to focus on to enhance and grow strong leadership skills: collectively adapting in response to change, creating relationships across difference and fostering leadership in others.

Finally, key principles which research showed could contribute to stronger and more effective leadership, are offered as areas for further exploration, research, and discussion:

- (1) Non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations can play an important leadership role in society, often challenging entrenched power structures and systemic disadvantage. To succeed in this role, organisations need to work collaboratively to take calculated risks.
- (2) Leadership is a skill that can be nurtured and developed. It is also important to look beyond notions of top-down leadership and understand that leadership requires careful cultivation of respectful relationships within existing networks, as well as new connections across difference.
- (3) An important aspect of leadership is recognising the leadership of others, nurturing emerging leaders within organisations and networks, along with looking for, engaging with, and encouraging leadership in communities that civil society organisations aim to represent and serve.

A common theme emerging from the experiences of civil society leadership during COVID-19 is that leadership is at its best when it is collaborative and acknowledges the leadership capacity of others. This aligns with the idea of being in a *post-heroic* era of leadership. Rather than looking to the strength of isolated individuals, it is in the strength of relationships that leadership ought to be fostered.



What Stops Australian Civil Society from Leading Effectively?

Leadership is difficult. It does not matter whether you are the Prime Minister of Australia attempting to lead through a pandemic, or a community member trying to lead a campaign to keep a local childcare centre open, leaders of all shapes and sizes face similar types of challenges and require similar types of skills, just in different contexts and at different scales.

As one civil society leader reflected:

I think that some civil society organisations are just as hierarchical as any other institution. I think their operating models are deeply traditional. I think they're slow. I think they're driven by procurement policy, and they are risk-averse. And again, they are structured around these very old notions of leadership, and what good leadership is and people needing to feel powerful. They do some good work too, don't get me wrong. I think one of the biggest issues we have in this country is the growing chasm between our institutions and our people. I think that civil society organisations need to find a way to close that gap, to show others how to close that gap. Because I think, at the moment, that's one of the biggest risks we have as a country, is that growing divide.¹²

Through our research, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team has identified three key structural forces which are seen to create problems and hold them in place.

Failing to See the Bigger Picture

Even outside a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, for-purpose organisations face multiple challenges which impact their ability to act strategically.

These factors include working with constrained resources, strict contractual requirements from funders, responding to immediate needs, and changing external circumstances. These and other factors compete to keep practitioners consumed by the day-to-day, leaving little time or headspace for reflection on purpose, let alone any necessary realignment. Peter Mares of the Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership employs a windsurfer analogy to explain this phenomenon:

The temptation is to look at your feet, but actually you need to keep your eyes on the horizon otherwise you're going to fall in the water. That idea of keeping the goal in mind to inform the day-to-day. This gets harder in a pandemic or when you're juggling things. There needs to be relief for people to step back rather than step above.

Peter Mares, Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership¹³

Stanford academics David Smith and Jeanine Becker noted how, from a mechanical sense, "systems are perfectly designed to produce the results they produce."¹⁴ As such, leaders who do not regularly lift themselves out of the day-to-day run the risk of neglecting, perpetuating, and reinforcing problems within their systems that they say they are trying to solve. Meeting this strategic challenge at any level involves power. As Marshall Ganz noted: "In an interdependent world of competition and cooperation, using one's resources to achieve one's goal often requires deploying those resources to influence the interests of others who hold a resource one needs – power."¹⁵

Systems leadership theorist Peter Senge suggested that leaders need to be able to step out and see their operating environment from a "systems mapping" level. They can then create a "picture of the relationship and interdependence between the boundaries they normally assume"¹⁶ – those external pressures which motivate behaviour in an organisation and often pull civil society leaders away from the bigger picture. In this way, leaders will be able to understand how they can alter and redefine aspects of the system they control.

In an interview with a Strengthening Australian Civil Society researcher, civil society facilitator and strategist Ann Porcino warned of the sector-wide long-term impact of succumbing to those pressures:

...we find ourselves running corporations that are delivering products to their customers instead of organisations who are thinking about how we bring about change to the lives of the people that we are here to support or advocate.
Ann Porcino, RPR Consulting¹⁷

Similarly, Sydney-based social innovator Lee Cooper from RadicalBox observed how the inability to think big meant that the strategies put into place to address homelessness during the pandemic were "done in a way to plug the temporary problem not provide long-term solutions", so that once the height of the pandemic was over, similar problems began to re-emerge.¹⁸

When it comes to "thinking big", intentionally focusing on purpose can help guide more strategic interventions. Asha Ramzan, Executive Officer of Sydney Community Forum described her approach of starting at a new organisation, or entering a new network, as consciously playing the role of a "rank outsider without any vested interest," allowing her to ask potentially provocative questions which get to the question of "purpose and vision and all of those things."¹⁹



For Michele Goldman at Asthma Australia, the bigger picture means “we don’t want to perpetuate our existence. We want to work towards a time when our job is done.”²⁰ Tessa Boyd-Caine from Health Justice Australia reported that an important part of her role as the leader of an intermediary organisation was bringing together people across their network and “really working with them to identify the systemic issues that they are coming up against and to plot ways to collaborate around tackling those.”²¹

Risk Aversion and the Day-to-Day

Time and time again, participants in the Strengthening Australian Civil Society project stressed the importance of civil society leaders recognising the difference between leading and managing an organisation. This challenge can vary depending on the size of the organisation. Larger organisations can have the luxury of separate roles for someone who sets, drives and communicates the strategic direction and someone who operationalises the strategy. Yet even some bigger organisations can be overly focused on internal goals, such as maintaining funding levels and growing the organisation. Smaller organisations, however, are frequently required to combine operations and strategy. This can understandably see leaders of organisations becoming immersed in the day-to-day needs of the organisation and the people with whom they work.

Being overly focused on an organisation’s operations can seriously impact its effectiveness. Risk aversion can also stunt innovation and opportunity.²² Nye identified business management training as bearing the responsibility for many of these practices, with managers being urged to “merely embrace process and seek stability, while leaders tolerate risk and create change.”²³ Peter Mares observed that leaders “have to act on uncertain knowledge. You can’t always wait for more information. Of course, you gather what information you can in the time available, but in the end, you have to act on uncertain or contested knowledge, while taking into account a range of valid but competing interests and rights.”²⁴

When local bakery owners David and Bev Winter went to their local council and Rotary Club to garner support for their idea of a volunteer-driven food distribution for elderly and at-risk community members, the small business owners were turned down because of perceived risk. “It’s extraordinary, there was no support at all from them,” David Winter said. The Winters persisted and eventually got a state government green light for their initiative, which provided more than 10,000 meals at a personal cost to the Winters of \$90,000.

 ***It’s a question of what’s required. Like if something comes up, you do need to do a risk analysis. Fine, you do it, but it’s not going to stop you. If people try and stop you and get in the way, you literally have to sometimes steamroll the whole thing and that’s what this was.***

David Winter, small business owner²⁵

Along a similar vein, other participants pointed to problems stemming from an over-reliance on *evidence-based policy* and *measuring impact*. Can Yasmut from the Local Community Services Association, for example, noted how “the challenge of evidence-based policy is that it builds on incremental improvements at best – to be innovative you need to be evidence *making*.”²⁶

Ann Porcino, RPR Consulting, observed how some organisations she works with say, “we can’t do anything unless we measure impact”, which “doesn’t allow for new ideas or ways of approaching things to come up.” During 2020, Porcino worked with a network of Australian arts organisations and observed two very different approaches to the challenges of the pandemic. While many arts organisations used the opportunity to collaborate with others around the world and explore new ways of bringing their collections and cultural education programs to the public, others became more insular and looked for ways to cut costs while no one was walking through the front door. “Their mind is on what they think the funder wants them to do, not on what they were created to do,”²⁷ Porcino said.

Path Dependency

A crucial capability in systems leadership is the need to “follow the energy” and put existing plans aside when new opportunities and possibilities open. Unfortunately, leaders can often become stuck in old ways, following the established “path” within their organisation, which stops them from effectively being able to engage with others and take advantage of emerging opportunities. In the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton and John Kania identified this as stemming from an inability to break free of their own established perspectives, resulting from “personal and professional demographics, background, institutional resources and social network.”²⁸ In the same publication, David Smith and Jeanine Becker noted that this in turn can “undermine the need for empathy and being able to understand the experience of those directly affected and what our own role in perpetuating the problem might be.”²⁹

For RadicalBox’s Lee Cooper, “a lot of the civil society sector relies on doing things as they have always done,” which impedes real movement on issues, such as homelessness. In an interview with researchers, Cooper observed that funders and much of the sector are stuck on counting widgets like available beds or putting a plate on the table, when what is more important for the people

involved is the sense of a safe communal space to engage with others, being part of a community and able to access support.³⁰

For Wiradjuri man and start-up founder Jason Glanville, the idea of “service” is crucial to creating hope, truth, and authenticity in civil society leadership, and for enabling leaders to step outside of their own narrow perspective.

 **Leadership is a doing, not a position. An action and habit. And we’ve lost that. I don’t know that there’s enough service in leadership to convince me that people in leadership positions care about the things most Australians care about.**

Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute³¹

Not being able to adapt and move past our preconceptions undermines the important leadership capability of being able to learn and adapt through experience. According to Ramalingam et al., a feature of *adaptive leadership* is that “teams and organisations need to constantly assess their actions, recognising that they will have to continuously iterate and adapt their interventions as they learn more about the outcomes of decisions.”³²

Along these lines, CEO of The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) Carolyn Curtis observed in an interview “the sense of possibility that has emerged through COVID, to be agile, to innovate and to work with people,” and how the challenge is now to leverage this “as opposed to revert back to our previous state.”³³ Néha Madhok from Democracy in Colour said one of their key reflections from 2020 was that “people felt like they were taking a lot of direction from the top.” During COVID-19, Néha Madhok and Co-Director Tim Lo Surdo realised that they were making rapid decisions and some of the people in the team, particularly people new to campaigning, “felt like they were being left behind.” Learning from their experience, Néha Madhok and the team are committed to “going back and having conversations with people to figure out what went wrong.”³⁴



INSIGHT: Craig Foster and Play for Lives³⁵

Craig Foster, former Socceroo and passionate advocate for refugees and human rights, saw in the pandemic an opportunity for both amateur and professional athletes to use their position as important actors in civil society. He reflected: "Sport spends a lot of time and energy and money on promoting programs of social responsibility and promoting what it says are principles of building better, more resilient connected societies. This was an opportunity to actually live that."

Early in the pandemic, Foster realised the need for a new volunteer base – due to increased need as well as the fact that many existing older volunteers would need to isolate to protect their health. In response, Foster established a volunteer workforce whose activities ranged from members of local sporting clubs delivering food to international students to professional athletes supporting sick children with video messages.

Foster leveraged his networks across multiple sectors to encourage others to get involved, including relying on relationships with high profile athletes, such as Australian Football League (AFL) stars Adam Goodes, Tadhg Kennelly and Luke Parker. He also acted as an intermediary between Football Federation Australia, with its two million members, and the Red Cross, forging a collaborative partnership that was aimed at supporting vulnerable communities.

In particular, Foster worked closely with Addison Road Community Organisation in Sydney (Addi Road), to establish and demonstrate the value of a community based not-for-profit food aid operation. "I went down to Addi Road and said, 'Okay, I'm going to bring sport on site here and we're going to tell that story publicly to facilitate and amplify it and bring everyone else on board.' I worked within the Inner West Council, who reached out to all of their local sporting organisations, and I think we ended up with about 16 sporting organisations who came down. We had baseball, netball, AFL, all of these."

"The local clubs got on board, we brought them all down, told them what was going to happen, and we got a roster in place through a website called *Be Collective*, which was a digital vehicle to connect people and so we volunteered. Then after that, of course, that morphed into many ways to help."

Generally, Foster saw sporting clubs and organisations as powerful players within civil society which should become activated and lead in times of crisis. "Sport has the responsibility to speak up on important social issues that affect us all," Foster said.

What Facilitates Better Leadership?

Like all other skills, leadership is a muscle that can be exercised and strengthened. Through research into leadership theory and conversations with civil society practitioners during COVID-19, Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers identified key practices that individuals and organisations can adopt to do this. These practices recognise that having a formal leadership position within an organisation does not necessarily make someone a good leader. Effective leaders actively

enable new leaders to emerge from within their organisations and communities they are there to serve. Particularly in the modern era, when it is so important to work in collaboration, leaders also need to be as conscious of developing their own capabilities as they are of those around them.

Collectively Adapting in Response to Change

COVID-19 has been a complex crisis with economic, social and political crises sitting within a public health crisis.

 **[The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic required] changes in behaviours and incentives and in the relationships between different groups and organisations. Collective action in this regard might be in the form of coordination (e.g. among businesses), partnerships among different interest groups (e.g. businesses and communities), or dialogue across a range of stakeholders. Adaptive leadership has a crucial role to play in helping to identify shared alignment of objectives and scope for collective action across different silos and levels of the response. Such interactions enrich debate, are inclusive, and improve ownership of decisions. Ramalingam et al. in the Harvard Business Review³⁶**

Working as a leader in a more distributed and less hierarchical way brings with it particular challenges when it comes to facilitating decision-making, clear communication channels and mobilising an organisation, network or movement towards collective action. Circumstances and information can change day to day during a crisis. Ramalingam et al. noted that this means: “Decision makers at different levels need to be clear about what they are basing their assumptions and hypotheses on. They need to explain what is being done and why, and how a decision was made, so that if errors are identified, trust can still be maintained in the process.”³⁷

Public policy scholars Arjen Boin, Allan McConnell and Paul t’Hart observed that within shifting circumstances and crises, leaders are responsible for holding and projecting a collective story or “public narrative”, requiring “the need for clear, timely, consistent and repeated messaging and actionable advice, delivered by credible sources.”³⁸ Harvard academic and community organiser Marshall Ganz observed that, to be effective, a public narrative needs to combine values that resonate with and motivate individuals – a “story of us” which brings these shared values into collective actions, and “a story of now” which communicates the urgency and importance of the moment.³⁹

Joseph Nye similarly described leaders as “surfers waiting for a big wave”. Surfers do not have control over when the waves are going to arrive or how big they are going to be, but with experience they can learn how to anticipate when they are coming and know what to do when they arrive. Similarly, “individuals do not control events or structures, but can anticipate them and bend them to their purpose to some degree... Leaders matter when they have the intuition and skills to take advantage of those windows while they are open.”⁴⁰

 **There needs to be innovative thinking. Then there needs to be practical thinking – it needs to be workable. It needs to fly. Idealism is necessary but so is tempering it with practical politics and so therefore the need to build coalitions and alliances. Peter Mares, Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership⁴¹**



In a focus group on leadership, civil society leadership coach Roger West observed that “people telling the truth is important in crisis. And then engendering a sense of *we can get through this*.”⁴² In the same setting, Moo Baulch, Violence Prevention specialist and Director of Primary Prevention at Women’s and Girls’ Emergency Centre (WAGEC), shared a story about the way a leader she worked with during the pandemic kept a cool head to “keep staff calm, and has led by building a senior leadership team to spread that power and accountability out so it’s not all on one person.”⁴³ Jason Glanville, Chairperson from the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, noted that in collaborative spaces people make time “to decide and define who is doing what, which results in individual voices and actions empowered by the collective.”⁴⁴

In an interview, Bassina Farbenblum, UNSW Faculty of Law and Justice Associate Professor and Co-Director of the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, observed that collaborative networks still require individual action. This includes someone taking charge of ensuring accountability, creating concrete roles and keeping things moving forward. As an example, she noted that David Barrow of the Sydney Alliance was “absolutely extraordinary” at chairing meetings during COVID-19 with:

 ***...unions, NGOs, refugee groups, migrant groups, international students, academics and lawyers. [...] It could have been a messy talkfest that went nowhere, and it wasn't. He didn't really let people just say, 'Well, we should do this.' He pressed for commitments and details and asked, 'Well, who's going to do that? And then, what are you going to do and when are you going to do it?'"***
Bassina Farbenblum, Co-Director of the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative ⁴⁵

Building Relationships Across Difference

Being able to work with people with different views, from different backgrounds, living and working in different contexts is essential for creating the shared sense of purpose that a

successful leader requires. Marshall Ganz has observed that, “because relationships are beginnings, not endings, they create opportunities for interests to grow, change and develop,” and that leaders need to enable “teams to engage with conflict without suppressing it, and to differ without personalising difference.”⁴⁶

While crucially important, this practice can take people outside of their comfort zone. Senge, Hamilton and Kramer noted that most people tend towards feeling more comfortable “with those with whom we share a common history and views,” and the longer that we know and interact with people, the more we find ways to align with them. It is much harder to forge new relationships with people “who are at different stages of their developmental journeys,” particularly amidst evolving circumstances and time pressures.⁴⁷ Smith and Becker observed that creating relationships across difference requires spaces “to understand one another’s experiences, desires and pressures.” At the early stages of a collaboration or new relationship, it can be important to “take small steps and produce early wins to build trust and momentum” and a shared sense of ownership.⁴⁸

Along these lines, part of the practice of collaborative impact projects, such as the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment initiative in the small town of Bourke in remote NSW, is the implementation of “circuit breakers” – quick and achievable initiatives that have an immediate impact. Two examples of these in Bourke were introducing a free drivers’ education and licensing program to reduce the number of traffic offences and securing funding for a skate park in the centre of town to give young people something to do and help them feel part of the broader community.⁴⁹

In an interview, Teresa Brierley, who works for the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle and is part of the Hunter Community Alliance, described how the challenge of engaging young people in the church can be because senior people within the church often have fixed views about how people should be involved in church life. With COVID-19 shifting things online, an opportunity emerged to better engage with young people. Brierley noted that while young people have “rejected the worship side, they probably aren’t nourished by the theological



side of the scriptures.” Instead, Brierley and those she works with try to focus on “the mission” and social justice, and engage and start conversations with people who, while they might not attend church like their parents did, are trying to make a difference in civil society because “they see a connection with a higher purpose which calls them to connect with and strive for the common good.”⁵⁰

Laura Barnes, who facilitates the Australia Together alliance of organisations, such as National Shelter, Logan Together, Inclusive Growth Partners and the Minderoo Foundation, observed that they approach:

...the alliance partnership group as a sandpit. It's an opportunity for us to live, practise the ideas of being a bit brave, being courageous in our conversations, but also having a space of reflection.

Laura Barnes, Australia Together⁵¹

For Asha Ramzan, Executive Officer of Sydney Community Forum, part of the challenge with creating relationships across difference is that “we sanitise relationships into the perfect idealised relationship, where if it’s ugly, we think it’s

dysfunctional.”⁵² She observed the importance of sitting in discomfort and listening to people. “The moment we acknowledge the origins of our lives, and all the kinds of amazing things that have been possible, then all kinds of amazing things become possible together.” Civil society facilitator and strategist Ann Porcino observed that “good leaders genuinely want to know what people think, and decisions that get made are influenced by those opinions in the room.”⁵³

Fostering Leadership in Others

Supporting the development of leadership skills in others has long been regarded as a fundamental attribute of effective leadership. According to ancient Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu, when we “fail to honour people; they fail to honour you.” A good leader is one “who talks little. When [a leader’s] work is done, [their] aims fulfilled, people will all say, *we did this ourselves*.”⁵⁴

In the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Senge, Hamilton and Kania argued that while “ineffective leaders try to make change happen, system leaders focus on creating the conditions that can produce change and that can eventually cause change to be self-sustaining.”⁵⁵

 **Collective wisdom cannot be manufactured or built into a plan created in advance. And it is not likely to come from leaders who seek to 'drive' their predetermined change agenda. Instead, system leaders work to create the space where people living with the problem can come together to tell the truth, think more deeply about what is really happening, explore options beyond popular thinking, and search for higher leverage changes through progressive cycles of action and reflection and learning over time.**

Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton and John Kania in the Stanford Social Innovation Review.⁵⁶

According to Ganz, a systems approach to leadership requires restructuring ideas of leadership “away from the dominant model of a heroic individual, standing in the face of cosmic challenge, to a team approach.”⁵⁷ Oxford University leadership theorists John Stokes and Sue Dopson described this as a practice shift from “ego to eco.”⁵⁸ Based on interviews with 25 cross-sector leaders, they also noted that one of the key capabilities leaders would like to develop is “learning how to shape the context of the work that they and their colleagues are undertaking, rather than always acting from the front.”⁵⁹

In an interview, the Sydney Alliance’s Thuy Linh Nguyen observed that a key part of the mission of the Sydney Alliance’s Voices for Power project is training “community ambassadors”.⁶⁰ Voices for Power works in various Western Sydney communities to support people with education around their energy bills, engaging in capacity-building so community members can act collectively and advocate at a community level. Thuy Linh Nguyen noted that “there is a leadership development aspect, definitely, amongst those community ambassadors, who feel a strong sense of empowerment.”⁶¹

 **This is about challenging traditional ideas of what we think leadership looks like. What is civil society’s role in fostering leadership, and broadening the lens of**

what it looks like? Civil society can enable conditions so that citizens can lead in the way that is needed to address the challenges they face.

Liz Skelton, Collaboration for Impact⁶²

At an organisational level, Jane Hunt of The Front Project and Michele Goldman of Asthma Australia are two Australian civil society leaders consciously trying to develop new leadership within their organisations. Hunt has attempted to create an environment where “each person, it doesn’t matter where they sit in the organisation, is expected to take up leadership. We invest in monthly leadership sessions. We invest in coaching. For some people it’s the first time anyone’s actually asked them to do this kind of work.”⁶³ Under Michelle Goldman’s leadership, Asthma Australia has shifted from a model where they primarily operated independently as a research and advocacy organisation, to one that takes a conscious leadership role in partnerships and networks, making important decisions about when to “step back” and “relinquish power” and “work less in silos and try and work more project-based.” The organisation has been supported in this process by an encouraging board, an engaged membership and network partners with strong connections to community.⁶⁴

Finally, it is important to have awareness that different people will have different ideas of what good leadership looks like. Liz Skelton from Collaboration for Impact observed that “we fall into traditional patterns of leadership. We need to start with the people most impacted first, asking them and letting it come from them, because what I think leadership looks like and what they think leadership looks like is often very different.”⁶⁵ Along similar lines, Jason Glanville noted in a focus group that leadership development work often goes unnoticed and unappreciated: “There are women and men in communities that no one knows, but they are doing nation-building work.”⁶⁶ At a community level, Kim Webber from CoHealth observed that a “game changer” for their organisation during COVID-19 came from the Victorian Government recognising the community leadership and development work that CoHealth funded itself, which “no one is funding or thinks is important, [but] was actually a critical part of our COVID response in Victoria.”⁶⁷

INSIGHT: The Australian Centre of Social Innovation⁶⁸

Leadership was front of mind for The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) CEO Carolyn Curtis in the process of fundamentally altering the Centre's structure and ways of working. As Curtis observed in an interview, TACSI has moved from a "traditional, centralised hierarchical structure" to a "organisational network model, where you have multiple hierarchies that are based more around skills, wisdom, expertise, experience, as opposed to power and decision-making."

The new approach differed substantially from the previous situation where "people were making decisions because they were in a chain of command, not necessarily because they were the best person to make that decision or actually understood the most what that situation was."

Curtis observed that shifting to a new decision-making structure threw up challenges. "We needed to make sure that the right people, with the right experience and expertise were making the right decisions." She noted: "From day one, when I started at TACSI, I kid you not, I used to always hear like little whispers, 'Why does that person get to do that? Why does that person get to make that decision?'"

When it comes to the various communities across Australia that TACSI works with, Curtis observed how often leadership emerges within communities, despite people facing "quite deep-seated, intergenerational risk factors." TACSI has found leadership in unexpected places, including in a farmer, a young person, someone who had lost a friend to suicide, and the owner of the local hardware store. Curtis noted that many of these people have "remarkable potential, remarkable grit and quite profound natural leadership."

"I think we're just so hardwired to [understand] quite traditional notions of leadership," Curtis said. "I think what we're discovering through this work is there is a deeper, more connected sense of leadership that emerges when someone is so connected to a place." So, "if you were born and bred in Ceduna, your care, your love, your passion, your commitment to Ceduna, is going to far surpass any care of a politician, of bureaucrats."

Principles for Strengthening Leadership Capability

The experience of COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of civil society leadership in a number of important ways and offers opportunities to reflect and reshape our leadership practice into the future. This includes the opportunity to learn from leaders who have shone during the pandemic, particularly those who have emerged from surprising places or in the face of significant obstacles.

A common thread throughout this research has been an appetite for building strong connections and relationships with others. This aligns with observations that the command-and-control style of "heroic" leadership has had its day, and that effective leadership demands the development of collaborative and powerful relationships.



In order to support those interested in fostering leadership capability across Australian civil society, the research process has identified three important principles for developing leadership capability:

- (1) Non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations can play an important leadership role in society, often challenging entrenched power structures and systemic disadvantage. To succeed in this role, organisations need to work collaboratively to take calculated risks.
- (2) Leadership is a skill that can be nurtured and developed. It is also important to look beyond notions of top-down leadership and understand that leadership requires careful cultivation of respectful relationships within existing networks, as well as new connections across difference.
- (3) An important aspect of leadership is recognising the leadership of others, nurturing emerging leaders within organisations and networks, along with looking for, engaging with, and encouraging leadership in communities that civil society organisations aim to represent and serve.

Each of these principles deserves further discussion and reflection and are offered as stepping off points for future examination of civil society leadership capabilities. They should prompt some tough questions for Australian civil society practitioners, those who fund civil society organisations and the policymakers who create the broad authorising environment.

If leadership is a skill that needs to be embedded across organisations and communities, what are practitioners, funders and decision makers doing to develop these capabilities? How can leaders of organisations develop and foster leadership within their teams? What role can funders playing in developing leadership capability in the organisations they fund? How can powerful and entrenched organisations and structures shift in order to make way for grassroots leadership to emerge?

These principles suggest that more dynamic and inclusive styles of leadership may require the creation of new organisational structures. People who have held leadership for long periods may need to relinquish some of that power to emerging

leaders. To meet the demands of current and future crises, those in leadership positions will need to make tough decisions and take responsibility for them, with full knowledge that all decisions are made under pressure and with incomplete information.

If those in leadership positions cannot take bold and informed risks, if they cannot hold the collective story of what they are trying to do, if they cannot make space for leadership to emerge around them, can they truly be called leaders?





The Melbourne Towers COVID-19 lockdown

Like many other stories emerging from COVID-19, the Melbourne Towers lockdown in mid-2020 was a moment of chaos, connection and resilience. In particular, this story suggests that by supporting civil society organisations to undertake broad-based capacity-building and community development work, governments and other funders can tap into the connections of already existing communities, create opportunities for local leadership to thrive, and facilitate resilient networks that can step up and support people in need when future crises strike.

On the afternoon of 4 July 2020 in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia's second largest city, thousands of public housing residents looked out their windows to see uniformed and armed police officers forming a barrier around their homes.¹ Mere hours earlier Daniel Andrews, the Victorian Premier, had announced that the state was entering a Stage 4

lockdown to tackle an emerging COVID-19 outbreak. Unlike their neighbours in private housing across the street, residents of the publicly subsidised Melbourne Towers, many with histories of trauma, most experiencing the stress of ongoing financial hardship, were without warning subjected to a lockdown so harsh it made news across the globe as one of the world's strictest COVID-19 lockdowns.²

"It was a moment of panic and chaos," one community volunteer told the Victorian Ombudsman during a subsequent investigation.³ The Ombudsman's report found that the snap lockdown constituted a serious human rights violation, unnecessarily subjecting people to detention, anguish, confusion, and in the worst cases re-traumatisation. The report noted these problems could likely have been avoided if the Victorian Government had listened to the advice of public health officials and engaged with the many community groups and organisations that lived

and worked daily with the public housing residents. While the Ombudsman's report recommended a public apology, the Victorian Premier resisted. His actions had "saved lives".⁴

Over the course of the lockdown and the investigation, Victoria's political commentariat drew barricades in the air. Andrews was either a saviour who should not be criticised lest public health be put at risk or an authoritarian who cared little for the niceties of a free and democratic culture.⁵ As the virtual mud sailed back and forth across Twitter, Facebook and the front-page of mainstream news sites, health professionals, community groups and other civil society organisations responded on the ground to the needs of the communities at the heart of the dispute. This included CoHealth and the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), two organisations with long-term established relationships with local residents. During and following the lockdown, supported by funding from the Victorian Government, both organisations were able to employ or otherwise support a number of local residents as they sought to engage with members of their own communities.

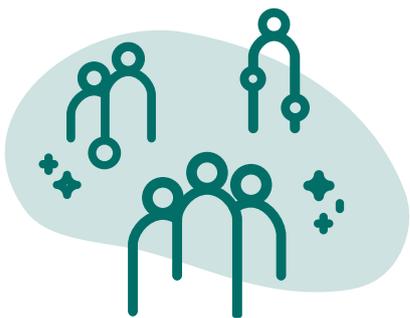
Community health provider CoHealth recruited people already living inside the public housing towers.⁶ These people acted as trusted conduits between residents from the building and a broader network of health and social service providers. Collectively, they ensured that people knew what was going on and had their urgent health needs met, while feeding into crucial public health activities such as mass testing, contact tracing, physical distancing and eventually vaccination. Working together, health workers and communities tackled the public and private challenges of a health crisis within a high-density residential environment.

Across a similar geographic area, BSL recruited and worked with community members from 21 different language groups.⁷ With support from BSL staff, people from a wide range of professional and cultural backgrounds designed and ran a community engagement program. The focus was to support public housing residents to share and process their experiences of COVID-19, while allowing the government and other agencies to better understand the experiences and needs of a diverse community with complex and intersecting vulnerabilities.

The community-engaged work of CoHealth and BSL started from core principles. Both organisations were committed to three ideas in particular. *First*, people are the experts in their own lives. *Second*, communities are more resilient when their members form strong bonds with each other. And *third*, everyone has something to offer, especially in a moment of crisis. Sometimes called "people-centred" and "strengths-based" approaches, these ideas are becoming more widely shared in government, philanthropy and not-for-profit organisations. They signal an acknowledgement and intent around valuing the importance of enabling people and their communities to lead the search for solutions to the challenges they face.⁸ The emergence of such ideas coincides with requests from communities themselves, from researchers and other knowledge experts, and from various non-government organisations for funding and support for community-led and centred work.

The Melbourne Towers lockdown is one story of many during the COVID-19 pandemic. With hindsight, we could ask: if the Victorian Government had funded the community-orientated work of CoHealth and BSL prior to the pandemic, or engaged with them and other community-based organisations before sending in the police, might the outcome have been different? We can also ask whether the NSW Government had learnt these lessons before sending NSW Police and Australian Defence Force personnel to enforce a hard lockdown in Western Sydney, facing similar criticisms about their engagement and relationships with migrant communities, Aboriginal children and young people, and people who came to Australia as asylum seekers and refugees.⁹

Most important we need to ask: what should be done now, *after* the event, to learn lessons more effectively for the future?



COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Capability Area 2: Community Connection

The formal and informal relationships between people around mutual interests are the beating heart of civil society. Representing the collective needs of these communities is the core purpose of non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations. Yet developing and maintaining these connections is easier said than done, particularly in the face of ongoing crises, changes in government and shifting economic circumstances. This challenge raises important questions such as: What operating and governance models best address community need? How can those across civil society build and hold powerful relationships and collaborations across difference? And can they meaningfully infuse their organisations with the vitality of people's real-life skills and experiences?

Introduction

Stories of the importance of community connection during COVID-19 are everywhere. The tone was set early in March 2020 with videos of Italians, under one of the pandemic's harshest and earliest lockdowns, leaning out of their balconies and singing together with their neighbours. Across the world, mutual aid groups sprang to life almost overnight, with communities self-organising to make sure that people in their local areas had access to food, medicine, and each other. When the virus reached Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities swiftly mobilised around the need to protect Elders and other at-risk community members. The instinct to reach out and protect and support those around us was on display from the individual level to the global stage.

Sadly, we also know that this is not the full story. The pandemic gave us scenes of grocery store shelves emptied of essential foods and other supplies. As tempers frayed, people took their frustrations out on at-risk staff in still-open supermarkets, restaurants and cafes. Pockets of protestors refused to follow public health advice about physical distancing and wearing facemasks, potentially putting their neighbours at risk. Residents opposed the Victorian Police Force

erecting fences and barricades around public housing residences in Melbourne, and multicultural communities in Sydney's south-west reported feeling singled out when additional police were sent in to patrol the community's behaviour in response to the surge of the Delta variant.

 ***One of the most important parts of community development is how you connect with isolated people and engage the most disengaged. It's always easier to connect with people who are involved in community dialogue, but how do you give a voice to the voiceless? How do you empower people to actually speak up and express their views and have input in funding and policy decisions? It's about creating space for these people to have conversations where you can hear new ideas of what could work.***
Can Yasmut, Local Community Services Association¹

Scholarly research around the pandemic has additionally referenced the erosion of previously strong bonds of social connection, emphasising the ways in which social isolation has negatively impacted the wellbeing of people across the globe. Debanjan Banerjee and Myank Rai, for example, noted in the *International Journal of Psychiatry* that "this important social threat of a pandemic is largely neglected." They highlighted the potential long-term impacts of boredom and loneliness from protracted lockdowns, and the way that uncertainty about the future caused by crises like COVID-19 could trigger high levels of anxiety, mass panic, poor decision-making and paranoia.² In June 2021, Australia's Mental Health Think Tank, chaired by Professor Maree Teesson at the University of Sydney, warned of the "shadow pandemic of deteriorating mental health," that was impacting already vulnerable people such as those with insecure work or housing, people with



disability, women and young people. The think tank recommended that “re-establishing Australia’s social connectedness will be a vital element of a public policy response in the next stage of the pandemic.”³

Even before the pandemic, the importance of governments and civil society more meaningfully connecting with communities had been gaining steady ground. For decades, political scientist Robert Putnam has studied changes in social capital in the USA, generally observing that a more *we*-focused or community-oriented society generates “positive consequences of social capital – mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness,” while a more *I*-focused or individualistic society generates “sectarianism, ethnocentrism, (and) corruption.”⁴ Putnam’s most recent work with Shaylyn Garrett argued that from a peak of community connectedness around 1960, the USA has descended into a heavily disconnected and atomised society.⁵ According to Danielle Allen, the core focal point for building community must be equality of power and influence, which is a bond “that makes us a people with the capacity to be free collectively and individually.”⁶

In Australia, Australian National University economics professor Andrew Leigh in 2010 made similar observations to Putnam about a decline of people’s voluntary engagement with clubs, associations and organisations.⁷ Decades

earlier, Australian feminist Eva Cox in her 1995 Bower Lecture, *A Truly Civil Society*, warned that the obsession with measuring only economic indicators, and thus ignoring “quality of life and life satisfaction indicators,” meant that a suite of social problems were going unaddressed and would only get worse.⁸ More recently, Australian governments and civil society organisations have begun exploring ways to more effectively engage with communities. At a grassroots level, frameworks such as collective impact and community-led justice reinvestment have begun to be used to align government, philanthropic and service sector resources around community-led agendas for change.⁹ In 2020, Andrew Leigh, now a Member of Parliament representing the ACT, followed up his 2010 *Disconnected with Reconnected – a Community Builder’s Handbook*, by gathering stories of successful community-led organisations and initiatives.¹⁰ In the same year, City of Sydney Councillor Jess Scully released *Glimpses of Utopia: Real Ideas for a Fairer World*, which similarly collects stories of hope from around the world to address the challenges “that climate change presents” and “the inequality that’s tearing us apart.”¹¹

Government and non-government organisations alike have a vested interest in making far stronger connections with the communities they represent and serve. Even in a country like Australia, which experienced comparatively few COVID-19 cases

and deaths in 2020, the pandemic shone a harsh light onto just how strong our connection across communities really was. In conversations with hundreds of civil society leaders across Australia and the world, Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers heard stories of systems failing during the pandemic, with people and communities falling through the cracks.

Complemented by academic and relational research into what frustrates and builds community connection, this chapter offers insights into three key barriers to building stronger relationships with communities: the charity model, transactional cultures and the erosion of trust. Three capability areas that civil society can focus on to improve the strength of connection to communities include: valuing lived experience, enabling community leadership, and flexibility and adaptation. Finally, three key principles which are designed to enhance civil society's capacity to support those in need through building better connections with people and communities, are offered as areas for further research, exploration and discussion:

- (1) Effective community connection requires building relationships around common interests and going beyond activities such as service provision, consultation or campaigning. Creating collective spaces, sharing food, and engaging in cultural activities such as music, faith, and sport all build community.
- (2) Organisations employing a strengths-based community development model can build supportive relationships with communities around their aspirations, goals and challenges. This contrasts with the more transactional, paternalistic and charity-oriented models favoured by the sector in the past.
- (3) Organisational structures impact connection to community. Well-designed organisations can bridge the gap by ensuring diversity of experience across leadership and decision-making roles.

A common theme running through these principles is that civil society is strongest when it is firmly oriented towards community. This requires civil society leaders and organisations to engage in a continual process of re-energising, re-authorisation and re-connection with the

people they claim to represent, fight for, and serve. The ongoing renewal and strengthening of these relationships is potentially the only way to resist the dazzling allure of corporate and political power.

What Limits Community Connection?

While the civil society leaders engaged in this research universally recognised the importance of their organisations being in closer connection with the people they set out to serve or represent, many also expressed concerns that they feel unable to do so as well as they would like. The conditions of the pandemic created particular challenges, but more prevalent were some longer lasting, *structural* trends or factors.

The Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team has identified three key forces which are perceived to create and sustain problems in place when it comes to community connection.

 ***I think the strengths of relationships can carry you or sink you. By and large, the services that we work with, the services that are already positioning themselves around the needs of their communities, are likely to be services that have managed for themselves greater flexibility in their funding, greater capability and capacity to shift as needs emerge. They are likely to identify those changing needs and be really onto possible solutions, well ahead of the structures they're part of.***
Tessa Boyd-Caine, Health Justice Australia¹²

The Charity Model

The first constraint on community connection is that a traditional idea of *charity* and service delivery still permeates many formal approaches to community wellbeing. British social entrepreneur Hilary Cottam identified that a traditional charity approach positions people's challenges as problems to be fixed, usually by someone else.¹³ One of the many problems with this approach is its



underlying premise that it is appropriate for people with power and resources to decide what is best for those without. In Australia, this echoes back to a time during which many religious charities played a role in the colonisation of Australia, including forcibly removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, brought most demonstrably to public attention in the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Bringing them Home National Inquiry*.¹⁴ At the very least, a charitable approach undermines a key principle of democratic societies: the idea that everyone should be treated with equal respect.

 ***The traditional charity model starts by thinking about solutions and how to sell them, it's not about empowering people to solve the problem.***

Magnus Linder, Anglicare¹⁵

Research literature underlines the problem of this paternalistic approach. In her 2018 book *Radical Help*, Hilary Cottam identified the problem at the heart of modern welfare states is the focus on fixing the problem and managing need, as opposed to a focus on wellbeing and capability building.¹⁶ This idea has strong resonance with well-established strengths-based practices and approaches, initially in social work for people with severe mental illness and then expanding into most other areas of care.¹⁷ In *On Life's Lottery*, Paul Ramsay Foundation CEO Glyn Davis noted how this idea reverberates through community-led collective impact initiatives which align the activities of government agencies and civil society organisations around the self-determined needs and aspirations of communities.¹⁸ When it comes to addressing the problem, Cottam begins from a largely overlooked insight from one of the key architects of the welfare state, William Beveridge: "His insight [was] that solutions start with people and the relationships between them ... [it] marks the starting point of a potential future path, a place from which we can begin to reinvent and design systems for this century."¹⁹

Many civil society leaders who spoke to the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team believed this *fixing-other-people's-problems*

approach can condition organisations and those who work within them in troubling ways. People with wealth and power, who have the means to help, can begin to believe they are better than those who need help, or that they should be rewarded in some way for the charity they do. This kind of thinking can gloss over intergenerational privilege, structural disadvantage and other contextual factors which create the kinds of opportunity and luck that people have access to, or not, a phenomenon that philosopher Michael Sandel calls the “Tyranny of Merit.”²⁰ In a focus group, the Tenants’ Union of NSW CEO Leo Patterson Ross and disability activist El Gibbs discussed the idea that “vulnerability is a conditioned experience”.²¹ The differing ongoing pressures on both people with disability and renters, as well as the messages coming from government, the media and service providers, lead people to feel undervalued and under-supported, and less likely to reach out for help. This resonates with research into how conditional welfare systems like Australia’s can demoralise people in need of public support.²²

Unfortunately, despite good intentions, civil society organisations can too easily become a paternalistic enterprise where *good rich people do nice things for poor disadvantaged people*, creating an environment where, as Thuy Linh Nguyen from the Sydney Alliance put it, “there’s a lot of stigma around asking for help.”²³ This stigma can potentially mean that big charities which receive large amounts of public funding to help people are not necessarily the organisations best placed to assist people who need it.

Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers heard illustrative stories of people without food during COVID-19 not going to charities like St Vincent de Paul to ask for help, but accepted a food basket from someone they knew – for example from the parents and teachers’ association at their children’s school.²⁴ Rosanna Barbero from the Addison Road Community Organisation observed how the Australian Red Cross, which was funded to provide support to newly unemployed and struggling international students, initially put in place an application process so complicated and onerous that people were discouraged from even applying. But through engaging with community-based organisations like Addison Road, which



established a no-questions-asked food distribution centre that fed thousands of people at the height of the pandemic, Red Cross was eventually able reach more people in need.²⁵

Transactional Cultures

Over the course of the last three decades or so, civil society organisations, in common with many other sectors, have become increasingly professionalised, borrowing techniques and structures from both government and private sector firms.²⁶ While such practices may have introduced cost efficiencies, measurement frameworks and accountability mechanisms, many civil society leaders interviewed expressed anxiety that the contemporary style of organisational management had generated an overly technocratic and transactional approach, which has shifted civil society organisations away from a deep connection with people and communities.

One of the elephants in the room is how undemocratic some corporate civil society organisations are. We have CEOs sitting on whacking big salaries and real inequality in those organisations. I think this is worth talking about, and asking whether democratising civil society organisations is a priority.
Susan Goodwin, Professor of Policy Studies, University of Sydney²⁷



Recent academic research has concluded that moving from a transactional culture towards a more relational one requires a reorientation towards relationships that form around connection to places or interests. Scholarly work, such as that of the American social thinker Danielle Allen, suggests that alongside the more naturally *bonding relationships* with people in our immediate social circles – around family, work and common interests – there will be a need to focus on creating *bridging relationships*, which connect people across difference, perhaps through a shared connection to their neighbourhood, town or city.²⁸ This idea of relationships across difference springing out of place has resonated with ideas around Aboriginal selfhood and autonomy. As Australian scholars Morgan Brigg and Mary Graham explained, this sense of self “springs from and is bound up with ‘Country’”, where “an Aboriginal equivalent of Descartes’s ‘I think, therefore I am’ might be, ‘I am enplaced, therefore I am.’”²⁹

The concepts of *bridging relationships* and *relationships springing out of place* can come together through practices, such as “collective impact”, currently explored in various community-led initiatives across Australia. As Glyn Davis noted, collective impact “assumes (that) coordinated work among government and for-purpose organisations towards a shared goal has a better chance of success than isolated pursuit by a single government agency or mission-driven charity.”³⁰

Collective impact brings collaborators together around a common agenda through a focal point of a backbone support organisation. Relationships are developed and maintained through attention to shared learning and evaluation, “continual communication” and “mutually reinforcing activities.”³¹ This kind of model and practice, “jostles uncomfortably” with more conventional charity or government-based practice,³² and potentially signifies the ongoing shift towards what UK-based think tank New Local calls the era of the “community paradigm”.³³

In a focus group discussion about the importance of community connection, the NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) CEO Joanna Quilty noted how in the modern era, “NGOs are often encouraged to behave like private sector operations and pursue their own interests and things like competition, expansion, efficiencies and profit et cetera which may not align with the community’s interest. It can be relatively easy to overlay values of social justice and compassion, but more challenging to apply them in day-to-day practice.”³⁴ In the same forum, Keiran Kevans of the Glebe Youth Service noted how recent changes in requirements from funders in terms of “funding contracts, had significantly increased the resources needed to manage data and report on outcomes,” taking managers of small organisations away from the essential work of engaging with the community. When it came to his small team, these constraints “made it difficult to step back and be reflective and connect with each other on a different level, let alone to consider how to change underlying structures and methods”.³⁵

 ***One of the ways we interact with our members and continue to build membership has been, until COVID hit, regularly holding community dinners where new members could come and meet and see what we do, and people brought food. The act of making food, bringing food and sharing food is a very strong way to build a sense of community.***
Colin Long, Hope Cooperative³⁶

Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers similarly heard concerns that large advocacy organisations can fall into the habit of engaging in transactional practices rather than building deeper relationships. In *Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism*, Peter Dauvergne and Geneveive Le Baron suggest this can result in advocates becoming unhealthily compromised and entangled within the very power structures they are trying to change.³⁷

During COVID-19, advocacy organisation GetUp! – which scholar Ariadne Vromen noted has had a “significant effect on progressive advocacy in Australia”³⁸ – learnt important lessons about connection through an attempt to support mutual aid activities. Although GetUp! claims millions of Australians as its members via people signing their online petitions, the organisation

was surprised when an attempt at community connection during COVID-19 did not go as planned. Attempting to replicate the mutual aid groups springing up across the world in the early stages of the pandemic, GetUp! launched a #ViralKindness campaign, including a website and digital resources. Unfortunately, their efforts failed to make the intended significant impact. Senior members of the #ViralKindness team observed that while the campaign provided a useful vehicle for highly engaged GetUp! members to connect with each other, this did not extend into actual communities in need. A key reflection was that the advocacy group may have been better off connecting with community organisations who were already engaged with, trusted by, and helping people on the ground rather than thinking their members could go it alone.³⁹

INSIGHT: Health Justice Australia⁴⁰

Health Justice Australia CEO Tessa Boyd-Caine believed that “2020 has given us an opportunity to become much sharper and clearer about how we connect with our network”. The organisation, which brokers relationships between health and justice services to help people receive “the help they need in the places they know and trust”, made sure that the shift to primarily online communication did not reduce access to support for practitioners in their network. Health Justice Australia introduced informal online peer networking sessions called “tea breaks” to substitute face-to-face interactions. These enabled practitioners to connect with each other around their experiences during COVID-19, which was particularly important for isolated practitioners who were routinely dealing with trauma in their clients’ or patients’ lives.

The Health Justice Australia team also created an online capacity-building program for practitioners to share their learnings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with one another. Surprisingly, through activities like these, Health Justice Australia found they were able to both expand and consolidate their network in 2020. Historically, the organisation had held two annual events, which largely drew practitioners based in Sydney and Melbourne. The new online activities increased accessibility and participation for practitioners living and working in rural and other more isolated areas. With a stronger, more connected group of peers across Australia, Boyd-Caine and the Health Justice Australia team have “moved into an assumption that we network online now.”

The Erosion of Trust

Societies across the globe have been concerned about the apparent decay of social trust for many years now. According to political scientist Robert Putnam, the way that trust forms across social interactions extends into the communities and organisations that we collectively build, and creates a bedrock for how a peaceful and cohesive democracy works across a whole society.⁴¹ A lack

of trust can lead to disengagement from collective activity and each other. This has significant general repercussions for social cohesion, and in times of crisis, this disengagement can mean people and organisations are less likely to reach out and help each other. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, Putnam and others have for decades observed citizen dislocation from the type of associations – sporting clubs, political parties,

faith organisations, labour unions – through which trust and social capital are built.

Evidence of increasing distrust can be found across government, communities and civil society. Electoral integrity expert Sarah Cameron has noted that Australian trust in our governments in 2019 was at its lowest recorded level since the 1970s.⁴² In his renowned book *Ruling The Void*, political scientist Peter Mair observed that in many Western democracies the erosion of trust and political engagement is coupled with indifference and disengagement rather than outright hostility or any motivation to change things for the better, a worrying sign for participatory democracies.⁴³

In a focus group, NCOSS CEO Joanna Quilty described how this disconnection amongst citizens can extend into broader civil society:

 ***For small, locally based NGOs, many can feel disconnected from decision makers, and disempowered and distrustful. There is a sense that decisions ‘happen over there’ and that the big players have more of a say in how policy is dictated, whilst small, grassroots community organisations are there to pick up the slack. As a result, there can be a collective sense that their work isn’t valuable, visible or understood by the ‘powers that be.’***

Joanna Quilty, NCOSS⁴⁴

Local Community Services Association Executive Officer Can Yasmut observed that in many ways, the 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19 pandemic “have shown us that we have a great deal of trust in our public institutions, if not in our politicians.”⁴⁵ Yasmut regarded the willingness of Australians to listen to and engage with public health and emergency services as a positive sign of solidarity and community-mindedness.

Despite this, when it comes to communities at the intersection of vulnerability and structural disadvantage, there is clearly a trust issue between communities in need and the organisations funded



to assist them. In relation to research on people with autism’s experience of COVID-19, supported by the Sydney Policy Lab, Macquarie University’s Elizabeth Pellicano said that “we asked how [autistic people] were accessing support, or who they would turn to. But very, very few of them talked about gaining support from advocacy organisations.”⁴⁶ Similarly, the Front Project’s Jane Hunt noted how the presence of “deep ideological divisions” can prevent government, industry, and civil society organisations from collaborating with each other.⁴⁷ In Hunt’s view, these divisions are not based on the outcomes people across these sectors want to achieve, but instead upon the preconceptions and biases they have about those who work in sectors different to them.

Strategies for Reconnecting with Communities

Overcoming the barriers outlined in the previous section and learning how to reconnect with communities better is, in the words of one focus group participant, “a constant challenge and process. It’s something you have to keep doing and working at.”⁴⁸ Through conversations with civil society leaders about their experiences with COVID-19, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team identified three factors which can enable and support civil society organisations to effectively connect with the communities they represent and serve, explored below. And as Ashlee Wone of the First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) noted in an interview with Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers, non-Indigenous Australians have the opportunity to learn from Australia’s First Nations communities:

 *... before colonisation, the attitude to disability and the inclusion of disability in community wasn't seen as institutionalising somebody or medicating somebody. It was working with them, accepting them, just knowing that an individual may need different supports or may take a different way or approach to do something, but it didn't limit the potential of what they wanted to achieve or fulfill within their community.*

Ashlee Wone, FPDN⁴⁹

Valuing Lived Experience

The idea of privileging the perspectives of *people with lived experience* has become increasingly vogue across the spheres of advocacy and policy development in recent years. A related critical refrain, particularly from the disability and First Nations communities is “nothing about us without us”.⁵⁰ While this is a clear acknowledgement of a desire to engage better with people and

communities, civil society can be just as guilty of engaging in token consultation as corporations or government departments. An important question, therefore, is: how can civil society leaders genuinely embed diversity of experiences and voices within their organisations?

In conversation with Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers, some organisational leaders revealed how they look to embed lived experience in key leadership and advisory structures. The Tenants’ Union of NSW, for example, which supports more than 30,000 people every year, has structural mechanisms in place to ensure that “we have no more than ten per cent of membership that is non-tenants and our board is 60 per cent tenants.”⁵¹ Organisations like Asthma Australia create formal advisory groups where people with lived experience of a particular issue can share their experiences, offer ideas, and comment on the direction of an organisation.⁵²

 *For us, the cooperative model makes sure that there’s no difference between community and the organisation because the organisation is the community. The rules of the cooperative are set up to give voice and power to members of the cooperative.*

Colin Long, Hope Cooperative⁵³

Other organisations work to ensure that people who have experienced an issue firsthand are resourced to act as spokespeople for an organisation or an issue in the media and at other public forums. Australian Progress, for example, has established The Economic Media Centre, which trains, supports and raises the profile of spokespeople specialising in a variety of issues including disability, cultural and linguistic diversity, social inequity, and workers’ rights.⁵⁴ Similarly, as part of their coordination and resourcing of the #RaiseTheRate campaign to increase the payment amount for people who are unable to work, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) provides remuneration for people to act as spokespeople on issues related to poverty and economic inequity.⁵⁵

Tara Day-Williams from the Federal Department of Social Services' Stronger Places Stronger People initiative described positive signs in "the continued focus on diversity on boards and organisations, not just gender and cultural diversity, also diversity of lived experience." From Day-Williams' experience working with Aboriginal community-led organisations and initiatives across the country, she noted that, "It's only when we create safe spaces and trust that some of that can be brought in."⁵⁶

Engaging more closely with communities of interest can be a process that evolves over time as organisations change, and it is not without challenges. Similar to the experience of Asthma Australia profiled below, ACON Health is an

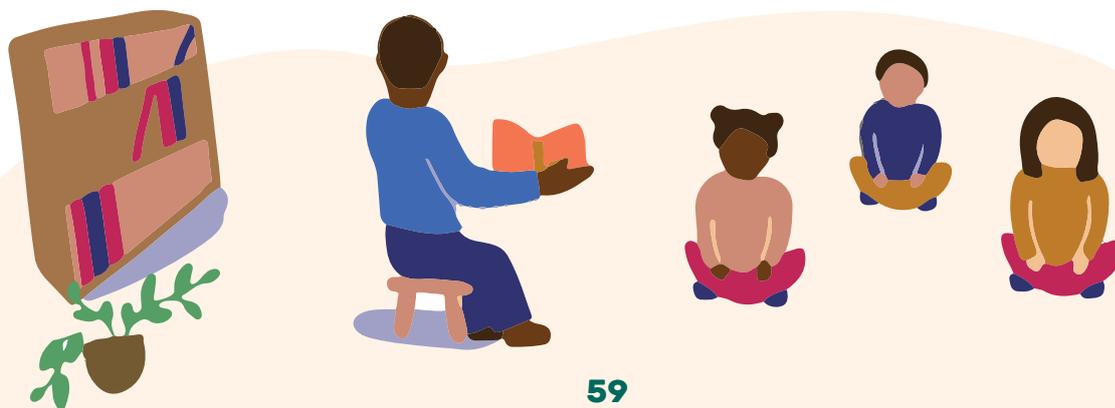
organisation that has had to change with the times. Beginning in 1985 in NSW at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, ACON was originally "an AIDS organisation largely focused on the needs of gay men."⁵⁷ Around 20 years ago, ACON changed their mandate to focus more broadly on health issues facing LGBTQIA+ communities. In a focus group, ACON President Justin Koonin admitted that in some instances it has taken them this long to build the relationships and trust. "We have had to work hard with trans and gender diverse communities to make sure they are represented within the organisation and our work. We have done the same with Aboriginal communities and with women. There has been a lot of progress, but there is still work to do."⁵⁸

INSIGHT: Asthma Australia⁵⁹

In recent years, for-purpose consumer organisation Asthma Australia has revolutionised the way they engage with their consumer base. With no real differences in key indicators around asthma for the last two decades, the organisation decided that if they were to make any meaningful progress, they needed to approach their activities from a different direction – the perspective of those most affected by asthma itself. As CEO Michele Goldman explained: "We don't have the answers, but people with asthma do."

Three years ago, a starting point was setting up a Consumer Advisory Council containing a diverse range of people who experience asthma, to better understand the effects of the disease on different communities. During the 2019-20 bushfires, over 12,000 people responded to an Asthma Australia survey and shared their experiences. During the pandemic, the organisation surveyed more than 1,000 people with asthma, who agreed to undertake surveys as part of a regular panel, to understand how the pandemic was affecting them specifically. These insights have been strengthened by the organisation's Asthma Champions program, where 150 people with asthma have shared their stories in the media and have met with politicians.

When it comes to having impact in communities where asthma and other chronic diseases are a big problem, Asthma Australia has realised that "we really need to have a partner at a grassroots level," Goldman noted, "because that's definitely not one of our strengths as a national organisation – to have the credibility and the networks at a local level." A new commitment from the organisation to "find someone at a local level to partner with" has created collaborations with organisations across the country, including one in South Brisbane which resulted in a resource – sharing learnings from the experience of collaborating – for people and communities looking to engage in similar collective projects.



Supporting Community Leadership

While the more formal and hierarchical aspects of our social welfare frameworks have long been based on addressing people's immediate problems, Australia also has a well-developed – if less supported through government funding – history of developing community leadership and capabilities. This can be seen across the network of hundreds of community-led organisations across the country, from neighbourhood centres, Aboriginal health organisations, community legal centres and women's shelters – many of which grew out of feminist, social justice, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights movements in the second half of last century.⁶⁰ Numerous modern collaborative frameworks discussed earlier, such as collective impact and community-led justice reinvestment, have a strong focus on getting behind and supporting community leadership. Similarly in the UK, a revitalisation of community leadership over the last decade, in response to the introduction of strict austerity measures by conservative governments, has been chronicled, developed and supported by organisations, such as Citizens UK, Locality, and New Local.⁶¹

Numerous civil society leaders who spoke with Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers emphasised the need to do more to back community leadership and capability building, pointing towards positive examples of community leadership during COVID-19. Tessa Boyd-Caine of Health Justice Australia saw leadership and capability building as part of her organisation's role as an intermediary supporting health justice partnerships across the country, "helping practitioners reshape their services around the needs of the people they are here to help."⁶² Similar ideas were also part of the Sydney Alliance's Voices for Power project:

 ***Voices for Power aims to build leaders in diverse migrant and ethnic communities across Sydney, to take collective action on issues around energy affordability, transformation of our energy system, and access to renewables.***

Thuy Linh Nguyen, Sydney Alliance⁶³

In a focus group exploring community connection during COVID-19, participants discussed various aspects of community leadership. This included the

importance of acknowledging that governments and for-purpose organisations wishing to engage with local leadership will invariably need to consider the appropriateness of "different models for different communities."⁶⁴ Along the same lines, Kerry Graham from Collaboration for Impact noted how among the place-based work their organisation does, community leadership often emerges as a result of the failure of government and established civil society organisations over decades to fulfil their promise to address the needs of communities.⁶⁵ Rectifying this involved "moving decision makers towards shared goals set by that community."⁶⁶ In the same discussion, disability activist El Gibbs observed how much leadership occurred "outside existing structures", which meant that governments and service providers were missing out on access to skills, experience and expertise that could benefit the whole system.⁶⁷

Multiple participants observed that governments need to start thinking about, supporting and funding community leadership before crisis hits, not after. During the early days of COVID-19, when the Victorian government implemented the snap lockdown for the Melbourne Towers public housing residents, the Victorian Government failed to consider the needs of the communities living in these towers, or engage with the community organisations which were trusted by the residents. Instead, as reported by the Victorian Ombudsman, they sent in the police and re-traumatised people, many of whom had fled brutal police states.⁶⁸

Kim Webber of community health provider CoHealth reflected on this experience, noting how the "community engagement work, which no one ever funds or thinks is important, was actually the critical part of our COVID response."⁶⁹ By drawing on and strengthening their existing relationships with the Melbourne Towers community, eventually with Victorian Government funding, CoHealth was able to support people in ways which were culturally appropriate. The organisation hired 80 bi-cultural workers living in the towers to help coordinate their response. These workers were able to meet the specific needs of those experiencing lockdown as they spoke common languages, shared cultural customs, and had ongoing relationships with the people they were advocating for. Through this program CoHealth was able to develop new skills among community members as well as link in with the wider public health response to the pandemic.⁷⁰

INSIGHT: Brotherhood of St Laurence⁷¹

The pandemic offered an opportunity for the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), an organisation working to prevent and reduce the effects of poverty, to reimagine employment within service design. In the past, Kim McAlister, Senior Manager Strategic Partnerships - Community Engagement, had found that traditional hiring practices often led to employing professionals who found it difficult to think outside of the frameworks established from education or previous employment.

During COVID-19, the BSL Strategic Partnerships team trialled a different way of working with the Victorian Government through the Work for Victoria initiative. BSL hired 32 people in Melbourne from diverse backgrounds and cultural experiences, intentionally employing people who experienced structural barriers to employment, such as migrants or refugees. Kim McAlister said this hiring process originated from the principle that “everybody has something to offer”. The new team used a range of mechanisms to develop capacity, including encouraging creativity and inquisitiveness. The team co-designed a community engagement project which helped the Victorian Government to understand the experiences of vulnerable populations during COVID-19, while providing Melbourne residents with an important avenue for processing their experiences of lockdown and the pandemic.

The team thrived because of their diverse perspectives, community connections and the ability to think outside the traditional models of welfare support. As McAlister noted, “People in the community have told us it's the most authentic community engagement approach they've ever known of. They actually felt very validated and very listened to through the work of the team.”

Flexibility and Adaptation

Public policy scholar Paul Cairney observed that responding to emerging crises requires the ability to adapt and change.⁷² Business-as-usual and activities once thought critical need to be put aside to focus on what is most pressing. During an environmental disaster like the bushfires, for example, immediate needs may include access to timely information about the level of danger, support to evacuate or defend property and, in the most extreme cases, emergency food and shelter to rebuild once the danger has passed. British social entrepreneur Hilary Cottam noted that whether in times of crisis or otherwise, an important part of successfully connecting to communities is being able to reorient and shift when peoples' needs change.⁷³

 *This year has been a striking example of the need sometimes for putting down tools for what we had planned and instead responding to people.*

Michele Goldman, Asthma Australia⁷⁴

COVID-19 led people, communities and organisations to use existing technologies in new

ways, helping them stay connected. Team meetings, training programs, international conferences and more all shifted online using real-time video technologies, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype. In the Catholic dioceses of Sydney and Hunter-Maitland, shifting to Zoom increased people's participation in church community activities, such as sermons and discussion groups. Once people had access to the technology, they were then able to set up their own online spaces to connect with each other and explore ideas and activities outside the usual church leadership structures.⁷⁵

For intermediary organisations, such as Health Justice Australia and Fams, the shift online also increased participation in sector-wide networking events, particularly from practitioners in rural, regional and remote areas. Julie Hourigan Ruse from Fams explained: “We moved all of our workshops online. We've saved a lot of money by not travelling. We connected with more people than we've ever connected with because instead of doing a workshop in Armidale and people from Inverell and Moree and everybody having to come to us, we were able to get everybody.”⁷⁶ Elise Ganley from the Queensland Community Alliance reflected on their attempts to letterbox thousands of people

to enable mutual aid, which did not result in "a lot of uptake." To her mind, a big organisation "was bulkier and slower than mutual aid on Facebook."⁷⁷

At the same time, a clear digital divide and under-investment in resources meant that people and communities most at risk became the least connected. When schooling moved online, children without access to computers simply fell off the radar, and not all working families had the ability to provide the in-home supervision that children needed. National child protection peak body, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), noted that "out-dated telecommunications infrastructure and lack of access to internet, particularly in remote areas, has severely impacted the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to adapt to social distancing measures."⁷⁸ Similar problems afflicted community and government service providers which were overly reliant on out-dated practices, processes and computer equipment, and in many cases had to shut down operations for months, leaving people without access to essential help and services.

Becoming more flexible and able to adapt requires shifts in practice for funders of for-purpose organisations. University of Sydney scholars Susan Goodwin and Ruth Phillips tracked funding of non-government and not-for-profit organisations over 40 years. Their research demonstrated that funding has increasingly been influenced by corporate and market-like principles, and motivated by the idea that outcomes are generated by efficiencies, competition, and strict performance management.⁷⁹ In a collaborative research project around the relationship between the NSW Government and community sector peak organisations in the shift to commissioning, the Sydney Policy Lab demonstrated how these market-like principles can result in eroded relationships between organisations. New restrictions on activities via activity-based contracts and a continual focus on fundraising through shorter funding agreements can restrict the ability of organisations to change and adapt to emerging circumstances.⁸⁰

During COVID-19, the economic, health and social challenges of the pandemic inspired numerous governments and other funders to shift away





from these more inflexible and restrictive funding practices. Among many impressive innovations, a number stood out in discussions with civil society leaders. First, multiple philanthropists pooled funds and support and then channelled this through an intermediary organisation, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), to support individual First Nations community health providers.⁸¹ Second, the City of Sydney created a broad \$72.5 million grants program in April 2020 to support community services, small businesses, and the cultural and creative sectors during the pandemic, followed up in early 2021 with an \$800,000 recovery grants program of up to \$50,000, with little to no conditions for how or to whom the support is provided in crucial areas, such as social isolation, tenancy support and food security.⁸² Third, close collaboration between the NSW Department of Communities and Justice and NSW community-based service providers relaxed funding conditions and allowed more flexible delivery and acquittal of

funding relating to services, such as homelessness, domestic violence and child protection.⁸³

However, in many cases this flexibility took the form of short-lived exceptions only. Numerous community and government service providers simply shut their doors for many months, unprepared or unwilling to shift to different ways of working. Management restrictions imposed on Sydney-based community legal services for migrant workers, for example, meant there was little if any in-person outreach from March to September 2020, a period when tens of thousands of people were losing their already precarious jobs and needed urgent support to maintain food and shelter.⁸⁴ The conditions on government assistance for these same people, provided through government grants to large organisations, such as the Australian Red Cross, were often felt to be so onerous, complicated and measly that few people initially applied for it, even knowing that the support was available.⁸⁵

Generally, when systems are too rigid, they do not respond well to crisis. They end up instead relying on the presence of individuals and organisations who are willing to step up and focus on directly supporting people. Time and time again, Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers heard stories of volunteer and community-based organisations that were able to respond quickly and shift gears when larger bureaucracies failed. Normally a property manager for community services in Sydney's Inner West, Addison Road Community Organisation became a volunteer-driven food distribution hub during COVID-19, responsible for feeding thousands of families every week, particularly those the Federal Government had chosen not to support. Child and youth service-oriented community hub Hands Up Mallee in regional Victoria became the central food delivery hub in the region. A bilingual school in the Northern Territory organised food supplies for a whole community. Local business owners David and Bev Winter approached the local council and Rotary Club for help providing meals to thousands of housebound locals. When the bureaucracy said no, the Winters spent \$90,000 of their own money ensuring thousands of people got fed.

Principles for Strengthening Community Connection

The importance of community connection has been one of the core insights across all policy areas during COVID-19, encouraging those across civil society, government and beyond to reconsider their approach to engaging with people.

Without doubt, governments, philanthropists, and other funders have significant control over the authorising environment within which many civil society organisations operate. Moving away from restrictive short-term funding practices can support greater flexibility and responsiveness from for-purpose organisations, as can providing more funding for community development activities or requiring funded bodies have community-oriented governance structures.

At the same time, civil society organisations are equally responsible for ensuring that in crisis, the immediate needs of community members are put above risk-management concerns dictated by overly bureaucratic internal policies and reporting requirements. For-purpose organisations have both the ability and responsibility to embed community voices and people with lived experience in key decision-making and strategic roles, not merely using their stories. They can also exhibit these practices within their own organisations by establishing leadership, capability development and non-hierarchical structures designed to strengthen community connection and relationships with those whose interests they are there to serve.

As a result of the research process, the following principles emerged for strengthening and increasing community connection:

- (1) Effective community connection requires building relationships around common interests and going beyond activities, such as service provision, consultation or campaigning. Creating collective spaces, sharing food, and engaging in cultural activities such as music, faith and sport all build community.
- (2) Organisations employing a strengths-based community development model can build

supportive relationships with communities around their aspirations, goals and challenges. This contrasts with the more transactional, paternalistic and charity-oriented models favoured by the sector in the past.

- (3) Organisational structures impact connection to community. Well-designed organisations can bridge the gap by ensuring diversity of experience across leadership and decision-making roles.

The desire to improve community connection has been a common thread throughout this research, and each of these principles warrants future study, reflection and discussion to explore whether they can truly support civil society leaders and organisations in building stronger relationships with the communities they represent and serve.

Reflecting on these principles, civil society practitioners, funders and policymakers should be prompted to ask themselves some challenging questions about the role they play in strengthening community connection across civil society. How do practitioners, funders and policymakers know if their efforts to engage with people and communities are genuine? What operational changes need to occur so that large and bureaucratic organisations and governments can effectively interact and build relationships with people and communities? Are our structures and organisations open to being transformed by the needs and aspirations of communities?

These principles, along with this whole chapter, presuppose that civil society organisations are genuinely interested in pursuing equality through stronger relationships across stronger communities. If civil society organisations are not oriented towards community, when they are instead primarily focused on accumulation of financial wealth and political power, we may need to ask: Are these people and organisations genuinely invested in the needs and aspirations of communities? And if not, is their presence holding back the development and growth of community leadership and community-oriented organisations?



Food Security and COVID-19

The social and economic impacts of COVID-19 put people's access to essentials like food and other staple groceries into the spotlight like never before. The ability of our systems and networks to respond to crisis was put to the test, in many cases revealing a lack of preparedness amongst large bureaucracies, and an underappreciation of the trust and relationships that small, local organisations have within communities. Despite the challenges, inspiring examples of leadership emerged across the country as community members stepped up to organise and support each other, pushing past systemic barriers to ensure that individuals and families could put food on the table.

Food insecurity was already a significant issue for many Australians prior to COVID-19, running as high as 83 per cent in certain disadvantaged populations.¹ During the pandemic it became an even bigger problem, whether as a result of job losses, of people being unable to leave their homes, or from being unable to access Federal Government programs, such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker. In June 2020, Foodbank Chief Executive Brianna Casey told a Senate Coronavirus Committee that there had been a 78 per cent increase "in people needing food relief."²

This COVID-19 story is made up of three short tales of people and organisations who stepped up to ensure people had access to food during

the pandemic. Together, these vignettes are representative of the wide variety of civil society actors across the nation who helped to keep food on people's tables – inspiring community-oriented small business owners, volunteer powered community organisations, and some of the biggest charities in the country.

Small business owners roll up their sleeves

David and Bev Winter run a local bakery in Mont Albert, in the inner eastern suburbs of East Melbourne. During 2020, they spent \$90,000 of their own money to set up and run a Meals On Wheels-type service for many of the most vulnerable in their community, including elderly residents, international students and people living with disability. They recruited volunteers who, after undertaking some mandatory training, prepared freshly cooked meals in their own kitchens. These meals – about 10,000 in total – were then collected by volunteer drivers who would deliver them. The Winters were surprised to find that the deliveries would frequently take longer than expected. The volunteers were not only dropping food off at people's houses, they were also having a chat and getting to know their socially isolated neighbours better.

The initiative hit numerous roadblocks, including those thrown up by the local council and Rotary

Club, who balked at the potential risks involved in the project, but the Winters persisted. As David Winter explained, “If people try and stop you and get in the way, you literally have to sometimes steamroll the whole thing and that’s what this was.”³

Many of the diverse networks the Winters mobilised were based on personal connection, often forged through the bakery. Support was found in diverse corners of the local community – a sympathetic state MP, a local bank, a Presbyterian Church, the local police and in the many volunteers who put up their hands to help. David Winter explained, “the way that Bev and I operate is, we get an idea and we make it happen. Sounds corny but it’s actually very true. It’s the way we operate.”

A community-powered food relief hub

Located in NSW and founded in 1976, the Addison Road Community Organisation (ARCO or ‘Addi Road’ as it is nicknamed) is one of the most established community centres in Australia, which has tackled both hunger and systemic injustice since it opened. According to ARCO’s Annual Report, the challenges of 2020 required a “massive undertaking,” with ARCO “rescuing up to 20 tonnes of food per month and working with over 70 community groups across the year to provide access to good food for as many as 5,000 people a week.”⁴ Like the Winters, this not-for-profit organisation took swift action in response to COVID, in a way that may well be underappreciated by government.

One of ARCO’s strengths is how embedded it is in the community, with dazzlingly broad networks, including celebrity champions and Addi Road volunteers Craig Foster and Bryan Brown. CEO Rosanna Barbero explained to the NSW Government inquiry into the government’s response to the pandemic in 2020, “We work with 60-plus other organisations that order, collect and deliver our hampers to their communities and clients, from the Aboriginal Legal Service and Brazilian Aid, to the Exodus Foundation and Jesuit Refugee Service. People relying on us for their food security live across Greater Sydney, from South Murrumbidgee to Penrith, Redfern to Belmore. We have even provided hampers to communities in the Central West and South Coast of NSW.”⁵

It is those community relationships which Addi Road has cultivated over many years that makes it

possible for such organisations to do what they do. Barbero expressed her “disappointment” in the lack of emergency funding provided both by the Federal and State governments. She explained, “from experience and research evidence, we know that service delivery is more efficient and effective when it comes from the bottom up, because it better understands need, process and impact.”⁶

State-wide logistics across broad networks

At a different level and scale to these community-based efforts are organisations such as Foodbank Australia, the nation’s biggest food relief charity. John Robertson, the CEO of Foodbank NSW/ACT, noted that in 2020, Foodbank saw a 50 per cent increase in demand and a 40 per cent drop in donations. Robertson said Foodbank’s ability to assess, pivot and respond quickly stems from its deep and wide connections with a significant range of big and small charities. “In NSW we’ve got about 750 charities we provide food to,” he said. In this mix are St Vincent De Paul, the Salvation Army, Anglicare, and even “someone who might run a small pantry out at Lightning Ridge.”⁷

Another useful characteristic of the Foodbank network is its federated structure. While the national leadership team helps pilot the organisation, maintaining essential relationships with government and industry, and facilitating information sharing and learning across the network, the state-based operations run their own turf, with “agency coordinators” travelling around to develop relationships with local charities and forge connections with those on the ground to better understand what is needed.

As a specialist organisation in a dynamic system, Foodbank does what governments are not always able to do – form connections with community organisations and leverage strong networks. During COVID-19, this included new relationships with universities and related organisations to help international students that were struggling. Foodbank also maintains a decent working relationship with government, which often relies on the organisation to deliver essential supplies. “The government said things like, ‘Okay, we want you to do the international student hampers,’” Robertson said. “So, we go, well, how many do you want us to do?”



SYSTEMS AND NETWORKS

Capability Area 3: Systems and Networks

Across civil society, people are accustomed to working across networks, connecting and collaborating through groups, such as clubs, unions, associations and organisations. This should make working across diverse organisations a natural proposition for civil society organisations, yet our research reveals that people often find working in this way difficult. The dominance of political and market-led decision-making creates problems, meaning that civil society leaders can have trouble accessing leverage points to clear the barriers holding problems in place. Meeting this challenge requires asking important questions such as: How can civil society leaders help funders understand the importance of bringing organisations together in partnership? Can organisations transcend oppositional and overly competitive environments to maintain focus on the big picture? And how best can Australian civil society effectively mediate power and relationships between different communities and decision makers?

Introduction

Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic stretched and strained our systems and networks at a scale unseen for generations. In this modern era of growing political polarisation, and at a time when social isolation and loneliness are troubling public health concerns, the pandemic revealed just how important the connections between us are. Tens of thousands of people would have gone without food if not for the established and trusted volunteer networks based around community centres and public schools that coordinated with larger charities and organisations like Foodbank Australia. Without existing connections to community service providers, governments and other funders would not have known what support people needed or been able to roll out public health measures. The well-established networks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled health, education and community organisations leveraged trust among communities and their connections to governments, other funders, and service providers to ensure vulnerable community members were

protected from the virus, particularly in the early days of the pandemic. As Health Justice Australia CEO Tessa Boyd-Caine noted in an interview: “We’ve absolutely seen the merit of working in partnership as a way to navigate crisis.”¹

At the same time, not every partnership-based response to COVID-19 has been effective. A lack of government support for people on temporary visas pushed tens of thousands of international students and newly arrived migrants towards poverty and reliance on small, disconnected mutual aid and charitable organisations.² Ineffective communication between governments and the leaders of culturally and linguistically diverse communities saw restrictive police enforcement of lockdowns inflaming historic tensions, potentially entrenching systemic racism and violence.³

Looking at human society as a series of interconnected complex ecosystems is not a new approach, although in recent years advocates, funders and service providers have developed a renewed interest in understanding the intricacies of what they call a “systems approach.” In 1999, pioneering systems thinker Donella Meadows highlighted various “leverage points” for intervention in systems, whereby turning mutually reinforcing “negative feedback loops” into “positive feedback loops,” could shift the conditions which hold systemic problems in place.⁴ More recently, systems change theorists John Kania, Mark Kramer and Peter Senge outlined six “conditions of systems change,” highlighting that reform requires conscious attention not only to structural factors such as formalised policies, practices and resource flows, but also less explicit factors such as relationships between different organisations, power dynamics and mental frameworks.⁵



Is the ecosystem maintaining the status quo? Is it working to maintain the current power imbalance? Or is it working to shift and to change and to share power and information? It comes back to – are people and groups and organisations interested in a change agenda? Or are they protecting their patch, power and resources?

Tara Day-Williams, *Stronger Places Stronger People*⁶

The successful functioning of complex systems across society increasingly requires multiple people and organisations to intentionally work together across networks. This creates new roles for governments in their interactions with non-government advocates and service providers. Economist Paul Ormerod used the phrase “positive linking” to identify the key role of governments within a multifaceted service delivery landscape,⁷ whereby governments’ role is to convene and facilitate connections between communities,

service providers and other interested parties. Numerous public policy scholars, including Australia’s Janine O’Flynn and Gary Sturgess, have noted that this new role for government represents a shift from more traditional top-down approaches to governance and public policy, to more relational and collaborative ways of working.⁸ While these more networked approaches to governance can offer civil society organisations a seat at the decision-making table, the allure of increased power and resources can also impact an organisation’s independence and their relationships with the broader community.⁹

Working in collaboration across networks is core to how many civil society organisations aim to work, representing the way that organisations tend to spring up to meet community need, within a geographic area or around a particular policy issue. In Australia, many of these networks are formalised in federated structures, with separate or subsidiary organisations at local, state and federal level.¹⁰ Small community service providers can be connected to each other and represented by peak bodies around issues, such as homelessness or disability, or through regional bodies which provide

forums for all the smaller organisations in a particular area to connect with each other.¹¹ Increasingly, systems change frameworks, such as collective impact and community-led justice reinvestment are utilised to align larger and better-resourced organisations around the needs and aspirations of local communities.¹² In terms of advocacy, Canadian campaigning advisors Jason Mogus and Tom Liacus observed that smaller organisations coming together through what they call “directed-network campaigns” can achieve higher impact than organisations working alone or through one-off mass mobilisations, such as online petitions.¹³

In order to understand the ability of Australian civil society organisations to work within systems and networks, Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers have held conversations with hundreds of civil society leaders about their experiences with COVID-19. These conversations revealed instances where networks have come together to meet community need, as well as examples of our systems failing us, with people and communities falling through the cracks.

Based on these conversations and supporting literature, this chapter offers insights into three barriers holding for-purpose organisations back

from working in a more networked, connected and collaborative way: assuming that one person or group can *do it all*; unequal power dynamics; and overly competitive environments and mindsets. This is followed by three enablers which improve the strength of networks and civil society’s ability to realise systemic change: prioritising relationships; building cultures of learning; and working with intermediaries. Finally, this chapter offers three key principles which research has revealed can contribute to civil society being more connected, dynamic and effective. These are:

- (1) Civil society is stronger when people, communities, and organisations work in collaboration. The challenges facing people and communities often originate within complex systems governed at a distance. No single community, organisation, or even sector can shift these systems alone.
- (2) People and organisations undertake different roles within networks. This includes the need to create and hold spaces for collaboration and learning; to bring people from varying backgrounds into contact with each other; and to encourage action around shared goals.
- (3) Effective collaboration requires resourcing. Sharing experiences, learning from each other, and creating collective agendas for action requires time, money and people. For-purpose sector funders would be well-advised to make these investments.

A common theme running through these principles is the idea that civil society is at its strongest when people and organisations come together to work towards common goals – with these focal points defined at a collective level, not at an individual or organisational one. Thus, in order to have impact, civil society leaders must balance the needs of their organisation with the needs of the communities they serve, which can intersect but are never identical. Leaning too far in one direction can create organisations which hold systemic problems in place, while going too far in the other direction can mean organisations do not have the connections or resources to create powerful enough interventions in the systems they are attempting to shift.



What Stops Civil Society from Working Well in Networks?

Many advocates and civil society organisations have systems change as a key goal and list forming partnerships as an important strategic activity, yet often the change achieved is incremental at best. Governments and other funders say they want to collaborate with service providers more and connect with communities better, but the reality does not always match up to the rhetoric.

Through conversations with civil society leaders about their experiences of trying to provide communities with supports during COVID-19, the Sydney Policy Lab has identified three key structural barriers that prevent Australian civil society from working collectively and collaboratively through networks.

 ***I would argue our current civil society doesn't represent an ecosystem as much as it represents a machine-based, industrial system geared towards service delivery. There are emerging spaces in social enterprise and intermediaries, but predominantly when you look at the fact that four to five per cent of charities have 80 per cent of the funded resources, that is not an ecosystem, that is mass farming designed to scale things that are very similar across all communities."***
Lee Cooper, RadicalBox¹⁴

Expecting one Person or Organisation can **Do it All**

One of the clear benefits of working in networks is the idea of strength in numbers, and experiences during the pandemic suggest that places which had strong networks in place were quicker to respond than those without.¹⁵ This is consistent with suggestions that dealing with complex issues often requires partnerships with multiple actors,

and across networks that include government, non-profits and the private sector. For example, Klijn and Koppenjan explained that elevating the importance of networks assumes that “handling the complexity of difficult societal problems requires mutual adaptation and cooperation among network actors.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, working in networks is easier said than done, especially in communities and sectors where these connections and networks are not as strong. These weak links can be connected to factors mentioned earlier in this report, such as the recent dominance of transactional cultures, which tend to atomise people and organisations away from each other and into competition and opposition. A 2020 Sydney Policy Lab study of the shift to commissioning in NSW noted how past governance practices, based around processes like competitive tendering and strict performance management, undermined trust and relationships between government and non-government organisations, and therefore their ability to work together.¹⁷ In an interview for this project, Sydney Community Forum Executive Officer Asha Ramzan observed a similar problem in the policy development process, which she stated occurred “in ivory towers”. Thus, even if policymakers “really mean well, they’ve not sat down and developed a policy in a process with the people their ideas and decisions will impact the most.”¹⁸

Multiple participants expressed frustration with the way that too many of our current practices are based around the mistaken idea that a single intervention or organisation can be the magic cure-all for the complex problems people face. Tessa Boyd-Caine of Health Justice Australia noted that many of our service systems are built around this principle. Services are often designed and funded to “address a specific problem and when they work in isolation from other services, they don’t meet the needs of clients’ multiple or intersecting problems.”¹⁹ This singular approach can see health services only engaging with a person’s immediate need rather than considering serious social issues, such as homelessness or a violent relationship, which led to the medical problem in the first place.

 ***In the social model of healthcare, there's an understanding about the underlying factors in people's lives that affect their health and a recognition that any person in the team may be a conduit to help, but it is not necessarily the practitioner who is best placed to help someone on every issue. If you're working in a networked way, you don't need to be the single practitioner or the single service maintaining that contact.***

Tessa Boyd-Caine, Health Justice Australia²⁰

Despite good intentions, during the height of nationwide lockdowns in 2020, Australian advocacy organisation GetUp! discovered the impact of thinking they could do everything. Reflecting on their attempt to support and resource mutual aid groups across the country, GetUp! team members observed that the organisation's efforts would have been more impactful if GetUp! had reached out to organisations that were already connected to communities in need, rather than thinking they would be able to reach these people through their email lists built via online petitions.²¹

Kim McAlister of the Brotherhood of St Laurence observed a similar "we can do it all" attitude in the Victorian Government's police-enforced lockdown of public housing residents, which the Victorian Ombudsman's report found unnecessarily breached human rights and potentially re-traumatised already vulnerable people and communities.²² In an interview, McAlister noted: "There were assets within the community such as the community leaders or small place-based organisations that could have been a part of finding the solutions. But they weren't consulted, they weren't engaged in any way at the beginning of the Victorian lockdown."²³

Moving beyond these mindsets requires leaders to take stock and understand their own limitations, those of their own organisations, as well as be able to reach out and build relationships across difference. Public policy scholar Paul Cairney connected these ideas to bottom-up approaches of



governance, where emphasis is placed on learning, trialling, and adapting to an ever-changing external environment.²⁴ Similarly, the work of Toby Lowe for Collaborate CIC and the Centre for Public Impact highlighted the importance of developing what he called interconnected *Human Learning Systems*, whereby effective systems are underpinned by trusting relationships, rather than prescriptive policies designed by supposed experts behind closed doors.²⁵

A positive sign in this area emerged in a focus group for this research project, wherein Olivia Wright from the New South Wales Council of Social Services (NCOSS) noted a positive shift in the relationship between NSW community sector peak organisations²⁶ and the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) during the 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19 pandemic. The crises helped the peaks work together with "a much more collective view on what the sector and people who were impacted" needed. DCJ responded by listening to the experience of the peaks, service providers and people with lived experience, and "stepped away" to give service providers the flexibility they were asking for. Wright noted how "everyone came out of the experience thinking that was so much nicer than how we had worked together in the past. It felt like everyone came together and acknowledged that we're experts in our own spheres, but together as a collective we're more effective."²⁷



INSIGHT: Settlement Services International²⁸

Supporting the needs of newly arrived migrants, such as refugees and asylum seekers, requires a networked approach according to Violet Roumeliotis, CEO of community-based NGO Settlement Services International (SSI).

Government contracts that SSI and other community service providers receive typically have a narrow range of key performance indicators (KPIs) for what they expect service providers to do with the funds. However, “when you’ve got a human being in front of you, and indeed a family,” Roumeliotis noted, “their needs are diverse and complex, and you need to have that integrated approach.”

For newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, that initial need is typically some form of housing, followed by supports for people to start working if they can. This might involve helping people get their qualifications recognised, starting a small business, or enrolling in further study. Additionally, “people who have been in the camps for years or dispossessed and neglected” can have various mental health challenges and traumas and might require support in areas of child protection and family violence. To help these people, “the broad networks are critical,” Roumeliotis said. “You really need to tap into resources, because federal funded settlement services don’t allow for those specialisations.”

Roumeliotis noted the futility of trying to do everything independently. “No one can address all of the issues of a newly arrived refugee or humanitarian entrant and their families on their own,” she warns. “Nobody.”

Unequal Power Dynamics

Power differentials are inevitable within all networks and the way these relationships are handled can impact the way people and organisations behave. The legislative and financial power of governments can impact the activities of service providers, forcing them to deliver only a particular service, regardless of what people need. A consultation with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community which does not respect the cultural authority and power of the local Traditional Owners and Elders will have no standing or weight behind it. Those with position titles, such as Minister or CEO, carry power into a room that can make other participants less likely to offer their opinion, particularly if they think what they have to say may be unpopular with the person in power. Left unaddressed, unequal power dynamics can impede communication flow, coordination and collaboration.

Similar to ideas around leadership explored in an earlier section of this report, ideas around power are changing. In their 2018 bestselling book *New Power*, Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans described a shift, from command-and-control modes of building and wielding power to a concept of power that is created and distributed across broad networks which need to be harnessed and mobilised to be effective.²⁹ In a 2010 study of labour union coalitions, Amanda Tattersall at the University of Sydney described the importance of organisations creating “positive sum coalitions” around areas of mutual interest, through which power can be shared and participants can be explicit around their aims while acting collectively around common goals.³⁰ When it comes to moving and motivating people, political scientist Hahrie Han observed that when it comes to political action, people get involved “because they see it as a way to fulfil their personal goals.”³¹

Generally, working effectively within networks increasingly requires an approach to power that is relational and consciously negotiated. This is particularly important in Australia’s colonial context. Non-Indigenous scholar and community practitioner Clare Land noted that non-Indigenous allies need to develop a practice of “critical self-reflection and of dealing honestly with the impact of the dominant culture on Aboriginal people.”³² Land observed this is necessary, because acting



in coalition, including conducting research, can too easily replicate “issues of power and control” within colonial relationships, and thus can be sites of pain and trauma for both First Nations and non-Indigenous participants. These impacts can be somewhat ameliorated by participants approaching coalitions as “sites of learning and transformation,” where power, knowledge and experience are shared rather than imposed.³³

In discussions with Australian civil society leaders for this research project, Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers heard numerous observations about the impacts of unaddressed power imbalances during COVID-19 and in general. For example, Julie Macken, of the Justice and Peace Office of the Archdiocese of Sydney, noted the inherent power dynamic that is introduced when civil society organisations take money from governments, describing a “troublesome and uneasy master-servant relationship”, which can take the focus away from meeting community need and impact civil society organisations’ willingness to publicly criticise government policy.³⁴ This latter issue is compounded by Australian governments over many years actively attempting to restrict the ability of non-government organisations to publicly advocate for public policy changes.³⁵

One factor regarded as important for overcoming these power imbalances is financial independence. The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI), for example, has a ten-year long-term funding arrangement with a philanthropic organisation

that “shares their values” and uses their influence to support TACSI in making connections with other funders, rather than micromanaging how TACSI should spend their money.³⁶ Similarly, the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) was established with a Federal Government grant more than 20 years ago. This grant was successfully invested by the FARE board to the extent that the organisation is now accountable only to itself.³⁷ Unfortunately, very few for-purpose organisations have this level of funding independence, necessitating ongoing conversations and negotiations around power with funders and within networks. Laura Barnes from Australia Together noted in a focus group how:

 ***(It is) a really scary thing as an individual and as an organisation to push back on your funder who is supporting the employment of your staff if you don't have a trusted relationship. That comes back to the need to build the relationships that enable that kind of pushback to occur in a safe and productive way, and that doesn't risk all the things that sit behind us as organisational representatives such as staff, infrastructure, service provision, communities, the things that we care about.***

Laura Barnes, Australia Together³⁸

Unequal power dynamics can also exist between civil society organisations and communities, as well as within coalitions of civil society organisations. In the experience of Kim McAlister from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, some organisations act as “gatekeepers and won't let you go into community.” At the same time, larger organisations and governments need to be respectful of how they approach working with communities. McAlister noted the importance of hearing the voices of people themselves because “we can't make an assumption as an organisation where one or two people can talk on behalf of others.”³⁹ Reflecting on the effectiveness of community-based mutual aid during COVID-19, Queensland-based civil society leader James Farrell noted that sometimes well-

meaning organisations can do more harm than good: “When we think about civil society and their overregulated and overengineered structures, sometimes that needs to get out of the way so the community can look after itself.”⁴⁰

Unspoken and unacknowledged power dynamics within coalitions can also “lead to coalitions breaking up when things get difficult,” according to Sydney Community Forum's Executive Officer Asha Ramzan. This is particularly true when the self-interest of people or organisations is left unstated, or when coalitions do not take the time to understand where each party is coming from and align around a common interest.⁴¹ Deputy Lord Mayor of Sydney Jess Scully observed this problem at a broader level. She said, “one of the biggest challenges that we have as a society is that we don't ever have a societal conversation about what our priorities are and what we value.”⁴²

Overly Competitive Environments and Mindsets

Competition is not always antithetical to collaboration, but it often is. Public policy scholars Janine O'Flynn and John Alford highlighted that the difference between taking a competitive or a collaborative approach could boil down to our perceptions of what motivates others. They noted that an assumption of people and organisations being “all self-interested” creates an environment where results are driven by “competition, sanctions and rewards,” whereas believing people “come to a relationship from a more public-spirited motivational base,” can lean more towards “collaborative, partner-style approaches”.⁴³ As civil society organisations form around the interests and needs of their members and communities, particularly those thought of as for-purpose or not-for-profit, they are more naturally attuned to collaborative approaches than competitive ones.

The negative impacts of competition on non-government service providers are well-established, and indicative of the problems with overly competitive mindsets. In 2015, Brian W. Head and John Alford outlined a series of issues caused when governments pursue competitive practices to address *wicked* or complex policy problems. One

of these issues is fragmentation and disconnection across the system, which cuts off important flows of information through “an incentive to withhold rather than share knowledge,” thus resulting in a lack of understanding about what does and does not work, service and administrative duplication and cross-referral and integrated service delivery.⁴⁴

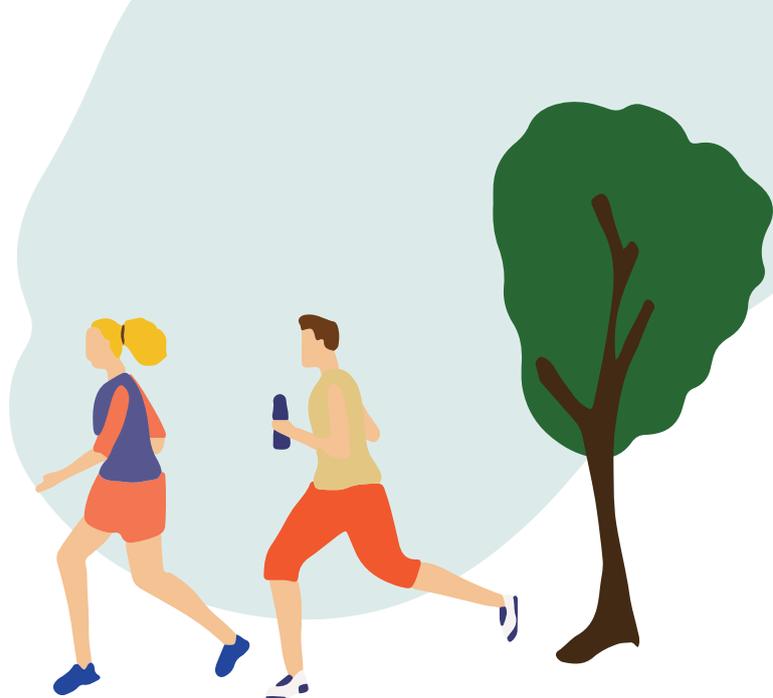
A 2020 Sydney Policy Lab research project exploring the relationship of community sector service providers and their funding agency found that past practices, including competitive tendering, had undermined trust and relationships across the sector. This created barriers towards a more collaborative approach to human service design and delivery, because organisations were heavily focused on their own financial survival.⁴⁵

In an interview, consultant Martin Stewart-Weeks of Public Purpose identified the funding and authorising environment for NGOs as particularly problematic, with the relationship often characterised by mistrust. For example, he described a contradiction in how the Federal Government works with mental health NGOs: “[Federal Health Minister] Greg Hunt and others want them to go off and collaborate, but the government allocates resources in a way that guarantees collaboration is almost impossible.” Instead, NGOs are in competition for both funding and clients.⁴⁶

 ***The community sector has been infected, contaminated by competitiveness and that is really getting in the way of them working together. We are such a divided sector. We still are. We are extremely divided because we are scrambling for the crumbs. There is so little funding, that we are literally stepping on each other to grab whatever we can.***

Asha Ramzan, Sydney Community Forum⁴⁷

Multiple research participants observed reduced competition between governments, funders, and service providers during COVID-19, particularly due to increased funding and permission given



to service providers to use existing funds in new ways. Federal Government economic stimulus measures, JobKeeper and Jobseeker, were seen to be particularly impactful. Liz Skelton from Collaboration for Impact noted that because of JobKeeper, organisations “were able to maintain staff” and many “funders suddenly did things people had been advocating for ages, saying that the funds wouldn’t be tied to a specific objective,” which “allowed competition to dissipate.”⁴⁸ Similarly, Olivia Wright from NCOSS noted that JobSeeker “lifted some of the stress off people we were working with, opening space for new conversations. When the funder removes the restrictions and risks, work was able to flow, relationships able to build, and competition was removed.”⁴⁹

The research also revealed instances where civil society organisations have taken action to reduce and avoid competition. For example, Asthma Australia formed by bringing together six separate asthma organisations after realising that the federated structure they traditionally used had become, according to CEO Michele Goldman, “very inefficient. We were competing with each other.” By consolidating their resources “on one plan and ambition,” they realised “how much more powerful we can be.”⁵⁰ Similarly, CEO Violet Roumeliotis observed that her organisation, Settlement Services International (SSI), grew exponentially “without competing against the people we collaborate and work with.” This has been done by looking at gaps and creating new services to meet them, including self-funding to become accredited and provide out-of-home care when “there were no multicultural services doing that.”⁵¹

What Helps Civil Society Organisations Work Effectively in Networks?

Overcoming these challenges and learning how to connect with communities better is, in the words of one focus group participant, “a constant challenge and process. It’s something you have to keep doing and working at.”⁵² A number of practices that organisations can explore emerged from our conversations with civil society leaders about their experiences with COVID-19. The desire to work in partnership and collaboration was almost universal and the following factors were seen as essential for doing this effectively.

 *I think absolutely the success we had in opening some of those political doors is because of the unusual nature of our alliance. We are seen as not being politically aligned and in fact we take a lot of effort not to be. We're also seen to not have vested organisational interests because we come from a range of different organisations.*

Laura Barnes, Australia Together⁵³

Prioritising relationships

Working and collaborating with others takes time – as famed leadership coach Stephen M.R. Covey noted, “change moves at the speed of trust”.⁵⁴ Unfortunately for many civil society organisations, modern funding agreements from governments and philanthropists are often strict about what they expect organisations to deliver, often prioritising easily quantifiable activities such as service interventions or running a specific short-term project over less concrete activities such as collaboration and training. These funding practices are consistent with more transactional styles of governance discussed elsewhere in this report, and thus can often mean a focus on building relationships becomes secondary to core business.

 *We're treating people when they're sick, we're treating their symptoms and it's just a band-aid solution. We're just those mice in the wheel continuing to run round and round without making any progress. We recognised we should try and attack the underlying problem as a way to do things better. Now, this is a completely new approach for us. So, we recognised we didn't have the knowledge, experience and capability, that we couldn't do it alone and that we needed to do it in partnership with others. So, the first step was finding a partner who could assist us through the process.*

Michele Goldman, Asthma Australia⁵⁵

Despite the barriers to working in partnership, multiple civil society leaders who spoke with the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team, observed the importance of taking the time to build new relationships with people and organisations, particularly in the context of providing a strong supporting mesh for when crisis hits. As Kim McAlister from the Brotherhood of St Laurence noted, “the experience of the pandemic exposed the gaps in engagement and trust of government and organisations.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, research conducted by the Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health around policy responses to COVID-19 for people with disability in Australia similarly found that “established long-standing relationships and networks between disability stakeholders and government actors” were key in ensuring that policy responses took into consideration the needs of people with disability.⁵⁷

In a focus group, Liz Skelton from Collaboration for Impact noted that “where there had already been investment in collaboration and collaborative infrastructure, where strong cross-sector relationships were already in place, communities were able to mobilise quickly.”⁵⁸ This can be seen in the work of community-based collaboration Hands Up Mallee in regional Victoria, which pre-COVID-19 had been working on building community-centred relationships with governments, industry, and



service providers to explore long-term systems change relating to child safety and wellbeing. This work was put on hold during the height of the pandemic, with the Hands Up Mallee team nimbly shifting to food security because “they had the infrastructure and relationships with the service sector,” and “funders were also able to respond quickly and say, what do you need?”⁵⁹

For Tessa Boyd-Caine of Health Justice Australia, supporting a network of 80 health justice partnerships across Australia, the existence of strong networks within rapidly changing environments ensures that for-purpose organisations can advocate for and address the specific needs of a diverse range of clients. “The good news story has been with the partnerships that are already up and running – existing partnerships have served those services, and the communities that they’re in, really well” she said. However, “where partnerships do not yet exist, it has been really hard to build those in this remote working environment.”⁶⁰

City of Sydney Deputy Mayor Jess Scully observed how many of the civil society organisations in the community of Glebe, unlike in other communities,

were extremely well set up to pivot toward supporting people during COVID-19 because organisational networks of support already existed and were embedded in the community. “It kind of came down, to a large extent, to the capacity of active organisations that existed in different places.” Similar to the experience of Hands Up Mallee in regional Victoria and Addison Road Community Organisation in Marrickville, Glebe had a number of community-based organisations with close attachments to the people in their neighbourhoods, “including a drop-in centre and after school centre, particularly for kids in social housing,” that “immediately pivoted to becoming a food distribution organisation, building on the relationships that they had with places at Broadway [shopping centre] like Harris Farm [grocery store], to source a whole bunch of food, and then distribute it out.” To support struggling local families, the community organisation drew on their networks to organise “letterbox drops to let people know that there was someone that they could call. They also mobilised to get technology to kids who were home-schooling but didn’t have the assets and the resources to do that.”⁶¹

The importance of taking the time to make these partnerships and networks genuine cannot

be overemphasised. In her study of labour union collaborations in Australia, the USA and Canada, Sydney Alliance founder and Sydney Policy Lab Education Lead Amanda Tattersall noted that too often “coalitions have been just another media stunt, an opportunity to list a large number of organisations on a letterhead in support of, or against, an issue”.⁶² Tattersall observed that two core aspects of successfully working in coalition are focusing on common goals and supporting the building of relationships between collaborators.

Building Cultures of Learning

The research process additionally suggested that the ability of people and organisations within a network to learn and adapt effectively to changing circumstances is crucial to a network’s success. Annabel Knight, Toby Lowe and colleagues at Collaborate for Change observed that learning is “the mechanism to achieve excellent performance and continuous improvement,” and “a feedback loop which drives adaptation and improvement in a system.”⁶³ Systems scientist Peter Senge described learning as “the currency of survival in an era of constant change,”⁶⁴ and that learning organisations are “where people expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.”⁶⁵

These conceptions of learning imply an easy flow of information throughout different parts of a system so learning can take place, as well as mechanisms and opportunities for that information to be discussed and disseminated in a way that drives change across the system. The antithesis of this approach would be rigid and inflexible rules for activity within a network; for example, a funder prescribing exactly what activities a service provider should perform. Overcomplicated and rigid systems do not have the flexibility to respond swiftly enough, while hierarchical structures tend towards the hoarding of information and power, creating bottlenecks for learning and adaptation.⁶⁶

The research process uncovered that in some instances, the crisis of COVID-19 enabled a change to business-as-usual activities and that the shift to

online ways of working opened up opportunities for learning. For example, the Sydney Alliance, unable to conduct their usual face-to-face organising, developed online training programs that expanded and strengthened the Alliance’s network.⁶⁷ Bassina Farbenblum of the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative observed that the collaborative research programs they are part of became important skill-share spaces during the pandemic, leading to deeper results and important advocacy initiatives to inform future research.⁶⁸

Ashlee Wone of the First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) described education as a continual activity and key role that their organisation performs. While FPDN are a consumer organisation that focuses on the needs of individuals, they do not provide services to people. Instead, part of their role is educating bodies, such as the national peak for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (NACCHO) and other peak organisations that have a medical model of disability or service provision focus to their core business. The education work of FPDN sits at an intersection of the need for culturally safe and aware practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability and a social model of disability, where it is external social factors such as other people’s attitudes which exclude people from full participation, rather than a person’s medical conditions. “It’s something that we’re just continuously having to advocate for and talk about,” Wone said.⁶⁹

Finally, numerous participants in workshops for this research project reflected on the importance of stepping outside the day-to-day and having reflective conversations, such as those facilitated by Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative. Asthma Australia CEO Michelle Goldman observed that she made “sure in a crazy day to make time to be here, just to network, just to see other people who share these kinds of ideas and want to work in different ways.”⁷⁰ Anita Tang from Australian Progress noted how important it was to have opportunities to “step back from the daily micro to-do list and go big picture,”⁷¹ while Olivia Wright from NCOSS similarly felt “inspired to be in a very academic conversation about relationship and power” distinct from her day-to-day.⁷²

The capacity of networks to bring people together from different backgrounds and experiences was also highlighted. Reflecting on a Strengthening Australian Civil Society community connection workshop, Kerry Graham from Collaboration for Impact said, "it's been inspiring. I feel lifted by diverse perspectives and commonalities."⁷³ Can Yasmut reflected on the important democratic function of simply meeting and learning from each other, having said, "this group is a deliberative democratic process in itself. Bringing leaders together in dialogue creates public space to have relevant conversations."⁷⁴

Working with Intermediaries

A third key aspect of any system or network is the connection points between the different parts. Different sectors refer to these connection points in different ways, such as mediators, facilitators and network hubs. This report uses intermediaries in the broadest possible sense. These intermediaries play important roles in keeping connections together. They are bridging people or organisations whose purpose is to make and hold new connections, often through strengthening the bonds between those once disconnected, which Harvard scholar Danielle Allen highlighted as essential for social change.⁷⁵

An intermediary can perform various roles – a facilitator of a meeting, a research and evaluation partner for a collaboration between government and non-government organisations, a community hub connecting-up members of the community with service providers and vice versa. Shiloh Turner and colleagues observed in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* that intermediary organisations are an essential part of collective impact projects, taking on important systems functions, such as guiding the creation of a collective vision and strategy, holding partners accountable for collective decisions, data collection, advocacy, communications and fundraising.⁷⁶

The activities of some organisations are centred around this kind of intermediary role. This includes peak or representative organisations, such as Health Justice Australia. During COVID-19 the organisation acted as an intermediary, convening and resourcing a network of more than 40 partnerships between legal and health organisations, making sure there was open and conscious communication:

 **2020 has given us an opportunity just to become much sharper and clearer about how we connect with our network, and to use technology in a way that in our experience has enhanced and increased access where we would have had much smaller engagement previously.**

Tessa Boyd-Caine, Health Justice Australia⁷⁷

Collaboration for Impact (CFI) also acted as an intermediary in various collective impact projects around the country, while supporting a network of practitioners who do similar work. According to CFI Director Liz Skelton, "What we saw during COVID was a need to be connected and share information. We went from quarterly to weekly catchups with the network. The dialogue was around how to support short-term needs – how do we support the communities we're in and what can we do to enable that?"⁷⁸



Unfortunately, the role of people and organisations performing an intermediate function – such as convening alliances, community hubs, and brokering or mediating relationships – can be undervalued by both the funders of civil society organisations and those in key decision-making roles. In a focus group for the research project, Olivia Wright from NCOSS pondered how civil society could better “articulate the value of that role in order to build it into funding, because it’s the glue! It’s critical, that facilitation, that brokerage, but never funded.”⁷⁹

Key Principles for Strengthening Systems and Networks

Overall, the strength of existing systems and networks were put to the test during COVID-19. Civil society leaders and practitioners interviewed pointed to the importance of the relationships and connections that were built prior to the beginning of pandemic, for ensuring swift, effective and innovative responses to meeting emerging need. This research prompted a realisation that there is value in reprioritising civil society’s work within networks, building relationships and acting in concert with others, as being at least as important as more easily quantifiable activities such as fundraising or direct service delivery.

The nature of civil society organisations ensures that they are working with, subject to and trying to influence the systems they are part of. Leaders therefore need to understand where they fit into the system and then broker relationships across a wide network – funders, policymakers, communities of interest, affected individuals and more. Making this work requires consciously transcending overly competitive mindsets and learning how to openly collaborate across difference.

After discussing these barriers and enablers with civil society practitioners, exploring the question of what supports healthy systems and networks within civil society, three important principles emerged:

(1) Civil society is stronger when people, communities, and organisations work in collaboration. The challenges facing people and

communities often originate within complex systems governed at a distance. No single community, organisation, or even sector can shift these systems alone.

- (2) People and organisations undertake different roles within networks. This includes the need to create and hold spaces for collaboration and learning; to bring people from varying backgrounds into contact with each other; and to encourage action around shared goals.
- (3) Effective collaboration requires resourcing. Sharing experiences, learning from each other, and creating collective agendas for action requires time, money and people. For-purpose sector funders would be well-advised to make these investments.

Genuinely taking these principles on board may require civil society leaders and practitioners to step back, reflect, and ask themselves some difficult questions. This includes being aware of what role their organisation plays in the larger ecosystem and considering what ways they might be causing problems or getting in the way of other communities or organisations. Particularly for larger and better funded organisations, these tough questions include how to *de-centre* themselves within networks and collaborations, to be conscious of the power they wield and how they might need to step back to ensure that more diverse and less-heard-from voices and ideas are coming to the fore. They may also need to consider how to use the power they have to change their own funding conditions for the benefit of all.

Funders of civil society organisations also need to ask themselves important questions based on these principles if they want their partners to work more effectively within systems and networks. This includes rethinking the types of activities they fund and by what means. If funders only provide short-term funding for narrowly specified activities, civil society organisations will not have the time or space to build impactful relationships with each other or with the communities they serve. Following these principles also implies an active role for philanthropists and governments to use their resources to create spaces and opportunities for civil society organisations to come together to share knowledge and experiences and create new connections with each other.



Non-citizens and COVID-19

One of the starkest policy decisions made by the Australian Government during COVID-19 was to exclude non-citizens, such as international students and temporary migrants, from financial supports provided to others living in Australia. Already facing precarious housing conditions and employed in highly insecure jobs in industries which COVID-19 shut down almost overnight, tens of thousands of men, women and children desperately needed help. Across the country, civil society organisations sprung to their aid, including a diverse advocacy coalition facilitated by the Sydney Alliance which included Democracy in Colour, the Australian Red Cross, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, GetUp!, the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, Addison Road Community Organisation and Jesuit Refugee Services.

While many Australians struggled during the pandemic, hardship was uniquely exacerbated for international students and other temporary visa holders. When lockdown began, over half of Australia's international students, living far from home and often working in heavily casualised industries, lost their jobs and over a quarter had hours cut.¹ Students were forced to rely on savings. Some faced eviction for being unable to afford their rent.² Others said that they had to choose between paying university fees or eating regularly. Students were vulnerable to exploitative employers, who preyed on their desperation for work and offered them below minimum wages.³

Despite being, as some international students and other temporary visa holders described themselves, "the ATMs of the Australian government" and "hung dry for cash", the Federal Government denied

them JobKeeper, JobSeeker and the coronavirus supplement.⁴ This has led University of New South Wales scholars Laurie Berg and Bassina Farbenblum from the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative to label this “ongoing failure to provide essential support to temporary migrants” a breach of “Australia’s international human rights obligations.”⁵

The Prime Minister encouraged international students to leave very early in the pandemic, telling them, “it is time ... to make your way home.”⁶ As Diana Olmos, a former international student from Colombia and community organiser with the Sydney Alliance reflected, “They wanted us to come here, but in a crisis, we feel abandoned. It is deeply hypocritical.”⁷ The Federal Government’s welfare policy, which excluded international students and people who held temporary visas holders, sent a clear message about how the government understood its role at the time.

With scarce employment opportunities to cover housing, high tuition fees, health, and food costs, and no welfare payments offering financial assistance, international students and temporary migrants rightly felt abandoned by the Australian Government. Fortunately, multiple civil society organisations stepped up to help. Foodbanks, big and small charities, unions, and non-government advocacy groups such as Getup! became involved

in the mission, eventually encouraging various state and local governments to provide support packages.

The Sydney Alliance was one such organisation. Working with the Sydney Community Forum, Addison Road Community Organisation and the United Workers Union in April 2020, the Alliance helped international students create a space where they could support each other with issues such as wage exploitation, low accommodation standards and social isolation – the Oz International Student Hub.⁸ Diana Olmos observed that “the Hub is not just a place for students to share their problems, but a place where we can engage in capacity-building, social cohesion between people on visas and citizens, leadership workshops and meaningful projects to enhance the student experience.”⁹ Driven by students and volunteers, the Hub is now a grassroots collaboration of more than 50 organisations, including civic groups, not-for-profits, community associations and education industry representatives, backed by a \$100,000 grant from the City of Sydney.

The students also joined forces with various partners to advocate for additional government support. The Sydney Alliance created an internship program for international students, through which they have trained more than 50 student community organisers from diverse backgrounds. The students campaigned for emergency relief packages from state and federal governments worth \$34 million, including \$21 million for accommodation support in NSW for international students facing eviction and homelessness. This was done in collaboration with 180 organisations, including the United Workers Union, Multicultural Youth Affairs Network, the Tenants’ Union of NSW, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees’ Association (SDA) and Unions NSW.



The Sydney Policy Lab supported the partners in this important advocacy campaign by facilitating a workshop where participants could reflect on and learn from their experiences.¹⁰ The campaign's successes were attributed to four factors: (1) a clear agreed campaign objective - people on temporary visas being able to access the same types of supports other Australian residents were receiving; (2) those most affected being at the heart of the campaign; (3) a conscious focus on relationships and accountability; and (4) an approach of campaign coordination rather than campaign control.

While many campaigns aim to centre the voices of lived experience, this campaign was able to go beyond intent and ensure that international students themselves were the beating heart of the campaign. Diana Olmos explained, "I was invited to one of the first strategy meetings with the partners of the Sydney Alliance, even before the borders were closed. This was an opportunity for me to expose, from my own experience and from people in my community, what was happening on the ground. What we brought into the coalition was the power of lived experience in community organising - that iron rule of, never do for someone what they could do for themselves."

The Sydney Alliance applied a community organising approach to their facilitation of the campaign, involving a focus on building trust amongst participants as well as making sure people and organisations made commitments which they followed up on. Sydney Alliance Lead Organiser David Barrow's chairing of meetings was described as "absolutely extraordinary". "He didn't really let people just say 'Well, we should do this.' He pressed for commitments and details and asked, 'Well, who's going to do that? And then, what are you going to do and when are you going to do it?'"¹¹ This form of shared accountability meant that different organisations involved took on different roles, whether it be media, lobbying decision makers, organising, or providing support and capacity-building for those affected. Generally, this was a campaign built on coordination and cooperation, not control, off the back of deep relationships and trust.

Sanushka Mudaliar, who was working with Addison Road Community Organisation at the time noted, "I think it is a testament to this way of working that we didn't have to agree - if you wanted to sign on you could, if you wanted to share information you could, but you didn't have to. There was no keeping score about who got what out of every little thing." Mudaliar also observed that the immediacy of the crisis of COVID-19 played a role in shaping the campaign, whereby "the unprecedented nature of the environment that we were in contributed to breaking down silos and created an opportunity to work differently. When I had previously been involved in trying to build a broad coalition on the rights of temporary workers, the parameters between groups were very clearly set, whereas here everything had been thrown up in the air by the pandemic. That contributed to shaking up the dynamics and creating new ways to work together. We didn't get bogged down in different points of view in the way we absolutely would have in a non-crisis situation."

Overall, once the coalition had identified the problem and their goals, it was driven by international students themselves who rapidly organised to collect wins for their communities. Diana Olmos summed it up well: "This coalition really impressed me in how quickly we were able to mobilise a response." A central part of their success, said Diana, was that the coalition took on "deep work, bottom-up", acting to "bring along the communities at the heart of the work."



ADVOCACY AND INFLUENCE

Capability Area 4: Advocacy and Influence

Groups of people coming together to generate collective power and achieve common goals are part of the origin stories of most civil society organisations. The impacts of these groupings can range from organising a team for a community football competition, to launching political parties that go on to play a leading role in policymaking and governing the country. Strategies for how best to advocate for change and wield influence have been shifting for decades, influenced by the digital revolution and the corporatisation of government and civil society. This leads to important questions about the effectiveness of the tactics that advocacy organisations employ, as well as how to ensure that advocacy activities truly represent the aspirations of people confronted by disadvantage.

Introduction

Attempting to create change is core business for many civil society practitioners, especially those working on issues relating to social and economic justice. For those used to observing public policy in Australia, the extent of the Federal Government's support for the majority of people unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly surprising. For years, advocates had been campaigning to no avail to raise the amount of unemployment payments above the poverty line, and to remove punitive behaviour constraints on receiving payments. Few, if any, observers predicted that a conservative government would double unemployment benefits via a coronavirus supplement for almost a year, lifting tens of thousands of people out of poverty, and then permanently raise JobSeeker payments by \$50 a week when the supplement ended in April 2021.

 ***The important work advocates do to prevent overreach and injustice, is just as important as the proactive advocacy that makes society fairer and more sustainable.***
Kirsty Albion, Centre for Australian Progress¹

Yet while these payments, along with the JobKeeper program, were a welcome relief for hundreds of thousands of people across the country, it was not a positive story across the board. Thousands of charities forced to provide crucial services such as food relief and mental health support were originally excluded from JobKeeper until interventions from organisations, such as Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) and the Salvation Army, had an impact. Australian universities were unsuccessful in their advocacy to receive support after the loss of income from international students, resulting in large-scale redundancies and job losses. Tens of thousands of international students remaining in the country were also excluded from receiving payments, as were other temporary visa holders, despite working in precarious sectors, such as hospitality and tourism. And while JobSeeker did eventually rise by \$50 a week, people receiving these payments were later once again forced to live below the poverty line.

Advocacy encompasses a wide range of activities, from lobbying to holding public meetings, from conducting research or training, monitoring policy implementation, to knocking on people's doors and appearing in the media. It can involve directly representing people, supporting their activities, making interventions on other people's behalf, and connecting people facing disadvantage to those in power.²

Academic Ariadne Vromen has observed that the nature of advocacy has been changing over recent decades, influenced by the shift from people's membership of more "traditional collective action-oriented organisations such as political parties and trade unions" to individualised "ad hoc involvement with local community, environmental and human rights organisations, causes and online social movements,"³ along with the emergence of social media platforms which allow more decentralised networking and online interaction.

A particular challenge for Australian civil society advocacy as it adapts to this new environment is

its entanglement with the state, either through funding constraints or heavy focus on political actors in the electoral cycle. Some of the origins of these issues, what Vromen called “the highly institutionalised, professionalised and balkanised advocacy sector in Australia,”⁴ date back to colonisation, with Australia’s early charities and non-government organisations playing a role in the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the forced removal of children from family, culture, and Country.⁵

Modern advocacy is often characterised by an emphasis on storytelling, by the importance of public campaigns, and by the idea scholars Jenny Onyx and colleagues explored, whereby “overt political advocacy is repressed and in decline.”⁶ They observed that successful campaigns demonstrate a combination of direct lobbying and “a sophisticated level of collaborative skill-building, educative practices, and public relations expertise.”⁷ At the same time, the professionalisation of advocacy organisations can potentially be seen to “draw organisations away from grassroots advocacy work” and focus on incremental policy shifts rather than addressing broader, more systemic issues.⁸

Non-government, non-profit and for-purpose advocates were extraordinarily busy across Australia during COVID-19, whether advocating to influence government policy relating to the impact of COVID-19, raise public awareness of ongoing crises such as First Nations deaths in custody or climate change, or help deliver essential supplies and services to people in need. For example, the Queensland Community Alliance coordinated a large-scale and cross-sector advocacy campaign resulting in a suite of policy asks ahead of the Queensland state election called the *Maroonprint for Queensland Reconstruction*. “We can hold government more accountable because they need community,” observed Queensland Community Alliance organiser Elise Ganley.⁹

Through discussions with civil society leaders about their experiences with COVID-19, Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers heard stories of how people and organisations have advocated and attempted to exert influence during the pandemic.

Combined with analysis of the relevant literature, this chapter offers insights into three factors holding for-purpose organisations back from advocating more effectively: the constraints of funding; going it alone; and the difficulty of communicating systemic causes. It then identifies three capability areas to focus on to improve civil society’s ability to advocate and wield influence: prioritising impact over tactics; putting people and communities first; and being prepared to act quickly in response to new circumstances.

Finally, discussion of these barriers and enablers in the context of Australia’s experience of COVID-19 and available literature revealed three key principles for more impactful advocacy and influence, presented as important reflection points for civil society organisations and their funders.

- (1) In a strong democracy, civil society is a crucial avenue for constructive debate that can inform and shift public policy. If governments are overly hostile to feedback and try to stifle dissent, people and organisations can become risk-averse when it comes to challenging entrenched power.
- (2) Advocacy is a strategic and collaborative activity. A clear focus on the desired outcome determines where power needs to be shifted, what relationships need to be built, and then what specific tactics could be best employed to create the argument for change.
- (3) It is essential to involve those affected by disadvantage in advocacy. This extends beyond token activities like consultation or using people’s stories, to organisational support and respect for community leadership, and deeper involvement in deciding advocacy priorities and strategies.





What Gets in the Way of Successful Advocacy?

Trying to exert influence on behalf of people and communities is difficult. It does not matter whether you are trying to stop a single piece of bad legislation, change the direction of an entire system, or whether your organisation is a government-funded service provider, a peak organisation, or an activist group with millions of public supporters.

Through conversations with civil society leaders – community members, for-purpose organisation CEOs, senior for-purpose sector employees – about their experiences of trying to advocate during COVID-19, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team has identified three key structural barriers to effective advocacy.

 **More energy goes into keeping things the way they are than goes into essentially asking ourselves the question: What are we here to do? What is the world calling us to do now?**

Ann Porcino, RPR Consulting¹⁰

The Constraints of Funding

The way that organisations are funded can affect their ability to advocate in multiple ways. In many instances over the past 30 years, funding

contracts from governments or philanthropists have increasingly constricted the activities of many organisations.¹¹ This includes funding contracts that restrict advocacy or prescribe funding to only be spent on specific service types, and Federal Government attempts to remove the charitable status and taxation benefits of organisations which engage in advocacy activities and issue-based political campaigning.¹² In addition to fostering an adversarial environment between governments and non-government organisations, fighting policies which are designed to restrict activities takes time and resources away from the critical job of addressing problems facing people and communities.

An unpleasant and restricted funding environment has a variety of impacts on organisations. In an interview for this project, Ann Porcino, who works as a strategic adviser to a variety of for-purpose organisations, noted how for many organisations, “their mind is on what the funder wants them to do, not on what they were created to do”, leading many to become risk-averse in their public advocacy.¹³ Martin Stewart-Weeks, another consultant working with for-purpose organisations, observed that limited pools of funding and practices such as competitive tendering can encourage organisations into “competing with one another rather than working collaboratively to influence government”.¹⁴

Julie Macken of the Archdiocese of Sydney’s Justice and Peace Office noted that for many for-

purpose organisations the funding received from government “informs everything we do. We cut ourselves off from imagining other ways of being.”¹⁵ Lee Cooper from RadicalBox stated that funding conditions around homelessness services “limit the ability to push for genuine change.”¹⁶ Asha Ramzan, Executive Officer from Sydney Community Forum, similarly lamented that on some occasions “it becomes virtually impossible to work with government funding because government believes it has the right to dictate projects.”¹⁷

Working towards funding diversity or complete independence, of course, could remove these frustrating funding constraints on advocacy and other work. However, for most of those across civil society, that can be unrealistic or at best a very long-term strategy. Nonetheless, some organisations reported being able to build advocacy into the work that they do. Health Justice Australia, for example, has a degree of structural independence around their funding which enables them to engage in

advocacy specifically around government policies which impact on the work of their members.¹⁸ This is consistent with the community service provider model whereby direct service delivery provides organisations with knowledge of both emerging community need and potential areas of reform in policy and legislation.

Working as part of a network, alliance or coalition also appeared in discussions as a strategy to mitigate the frustrations of funding constraints placed on doing advocacy work. Settlement Services International (SSI), for example, receives significant government funding to support newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees, a heavily politicised area of public policy in Australia. SSI CEO Violet Roumeliotis maintains relationships with many activist advocacy organisations, such as the Refugee Council of Australia and Asylum Seekers Centre. “We’ve all got a different role” in working towards the shared goal of “a safe and fair and equitable society for all people,” she said.¹⁹

INSIGHT: The Front Project²⁰

When the pandemic hit, Jane Hunt, the CEO of The Front Project, calculated that the rapid withdrawal of children from childcare services meant that at one point “most of the sector was about four weeks off closing,” threatening around 200,000 direct jobs and having serious knock-on effects for parents and carers in other parts of the economy. The Front Project was well-positioned to push for change, having worked diligently prior to the pandemic to collaborate with the sector to improve access to early education and quality care. In the end, children, families, childcare workers, and businesses all had a win, with early childhood education centres defined as an essential service for the first time, playing an important role in supporting families, workers, and business.

At the same time, Hunt noted that collaboration can be surprisingly hard, with “deep ideological divisions” preventing government, industry, and civil society organisations from working together. The childcare sector is made up of a range of different types of organisations, for-profit and not-for profit, with differing interests and ideologies about how things should run. Knowing that these differences could damage the process of advocating to government around necessary supports, Hunt prioritised working with all parts of the system.

She pointed out the importance of understanding and communicating to government the experience and views of families who are “absolutely missing from conversations over things that will impact their lives.” Hunt reflected that there is sometimes a “we know best” mentality in government that presumes they do not need to engage with people’s experience to know what to do and that this arrogance has increased during the pandemic, meaning those who were most impacted were robbed of a voice to inform crisis-related policy.

Hunt saw bridging gaps between the state and civil society as particularly difficult, with the gulf becoming deeper as the state hands more responsibility to civil society to do the substantive work and provide all the answers. She highlighted the importance of reflecting on what civil society could do differently together to create change.

Going it Alone

In addition to the constraints posed by reliance on government funding, many of the civil society leaders and practitioners the research team spoke to stressed the weakness of their advocacy networks or ecosystems. While most organisations strive to work collaboratively or in partnership, multiple factors impact whether these collaborations actually occur in practice. Collaboration can be hard work, and so when circumstances demand organisations continually react to external circumstances, often extremely quickly, participants reported that it is tempting to go it alone.

The broader overall shift in how people engage in politics over the last 40 years lends support to the idea that civil society organisations would be better placed if they worked collaboratively on their advocacy. People who are politically active and motivated no longer tend towards long-term membership of and consistent, stable participation in large collective organisations such as trade unions or political parties. Instead, they lean towards engaging more temporarily with issues that they are passionate about. This creates more disparate and more flexible policy communities that can unite people across class, political and other boundaries around a common cause to seek change together, which can then break apart as issues change or public opinion shifts.

US activist and educator Bill Moyer, creator of the *Movement Action Plan*, presents four key, interconnected roles that civil society actors could play to propel social movements towards success: the citizen, the rebel, the change agent and the reformer. According to Moyer, for social movements to succeed, civil society actors pushing for social change need “responsible citizens” who are publicly accepted by most people. Simultaneously there must be civil society actors who are rebels, loudly protesting social conditions through strategic non-violent direct action that targets major powerholders, such as government or large corporations. A movement needs change agents, working to educate and organise the wider public against the policies of the current moment and towards solutions suggested by the social movement. Finally, Moyer identified reformers who work within official

structures to introduce new laws or policies that reflect the aims of the social movement.²¹

Seeking to work in coalition in this way is not without its challenges. Jenny Onyx and colleagues have observed how forming coalitions and partnerships can involve “a process of de-radicalisation and professionalisation (and) engages both open and closed advocacy strategies.”²² For some campaigns, this process helps to create bridges between civil society organisations, on-the-ground communities, and decision makers where differences can be explored, and negotiations conducted in more constructive and legitimising forums than the mainstream media. In other instances, wider coalitions or alliances can be so broad-based that movement grinds to a halt, or the aspirations of the people and communities most affected can be effectively silenced.

 ***We're hoping that we're presenting enough community-led strength-based solutions that aren't seen as so destructive, but are seen as rebuilding, and working in a partnership, while still condemning things that shouldn't have happened or should be done better and things like that but looking at a more positive way forward.***

Ashlee Wone, First Peoples Disability Network²³

While *going it alone* is risky, collaboration is acknowledged to be crucial for success. It can involve working on campaigns as part of alliances; ensuring that the voices of people with lived experience have meaningful roles in advocacy activities; and taking the time to build trusting relationships with peers, funders and communities. Many newer organisations across modern Australian civil society, including Australia Together, the Sydney Alliance and Centre for Australian Progress, exist as broader networks or alliances to help overcome the tendency of groups to try to go it alone. They bring a broad range of people and organisations together to build connections, conduct skills sharing and create collaborations for change around areas of mutual interest.

The social, health and economic challenges of COVID-19 in many ways forced government and non-government organisations to look beyond themselves and focus collectively on the needs of people and communities. For one small advocacy organisation Democracy in Colour, this involved “all of those pre-existing relationships where people had strong connections being able to call on each other and work together – pre-existing trust was so important in that moment of crisis.”²⁴ According to Anandini Saththianathan at the Paul Ramsay Foundation, the best advocacy “response so far has been to stand alongside other people.”²⁵ While organisations reached out and came together at the height of the pandemic, the challenge remains to extend this instinct and keep building these connections so the commitment to collaboration extends well beyond the crisis.

Communicating Complexity

Storytelling, personal narrative and connecting with people emotionally are widely recognised as vital parts of successful advocacy campaigns. Our participants nonetheless believed it also remains essential to communicate the broader systemic repercussions relating to people’s individual experiences. Communications research around racism in the USA recommended advocates to “tie the particular race-based harms against Black people and other people of colour to the corresponding economic plunder that ultimately

hurts us all.”²⁶ Similarly, research conducted in New Zealand around people in prisons suggests that when general members of the public read or hear a story about an individual who has been or is in prison, if the storytellers do not contextualise the broader factors which result in that person being incarcerated, the viewer will tend heavily towards judging that the person deserves to be there due to some fault of their own.²⁷

Civil society advocacy often seeks to focus on the “systemic” causes of problems, rather than on simply alleviating the problem itself. Advocacy scholars Sheldon Gen and Amy Conley Wright discussed how “non-profit organisations are frequently playing a long game and they need to have a sense of an overarching plan to sustain motivation and course correct.”²⁸ This presents challenges. Long-term changes, outcomes and impacts within complex systems are notoriously difficult to measure. It is easier to keep track of short-term activities, such as the number of email addresses you have on your fundraising list, how many times you meet with your local member of parliament, or the number of times you appear in the media.²⁹

Moving beyond the conventional notion of individual responsibility in advocacy can be extremely difficult. The modern neoliberal political landscape has made ideas of the deserving and undeserving poor ubiquitous, aided in particular by policymakers demonising the unemployed and others requiring public income support. When introducing JobSeeker payments during the pandemic, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison took great pains to say that the payments were for those who had lost work through “no fault of their own”, suggesting that for other people without income, the fault was theirs.³⁰ The media’s attraction to reporting on individuals and personalities can allow political actors to avoid accountability for their actions through an “individual blame game.”³¹ Reinforcing this phenomenon, many civil society leaders and practitioners who spoke with the Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team expressed concern that media guides for modern campaigners speak of the importance of telling personal stories for getting media coverage, which can make it hard to draw attention to larger and more systemic issues.





It was really hard because the media just wanted case studies, they just wanted to hear about people's suffering. And each time it was 'we need a new case study, we need a new angle, we need a new person.' And obviously people get sick of sharing the trauma for no gain when policies aren't changing. People are obviously just tired and don't want to talk to the media.

Néha Madhok, *Democracy in Colour*³²

This does not mean that individuals cannot have impact on or within a system. But it does suggest

the need to do so in a more subtle way than many understand. Former Soccerroo turned human rights activist Craig Foster created Play for Lives during the pandemic to harness volunteers who were amateur and professional sportspeople to support emergency food distribution, having understood that “the elderly population is the majority of volunteers in this country,” and that the health conditions of COVID-19 were going to challenge this. Erin Turner of consumer advocacy organisation CHOICE also noted it is important to “place the stories of people with the data.” Turner also saw the value in engaging people in campaigns for systemic reform. For example, when CHOICE was campaigning around mortgage brokers they worked with members and supporters to “document photo evidence of [dodgy mortgage] advertisements in their own communities.”³³

INSIGHT: Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS)³⁴

According to Charmaine Crowe, a senior adviser specialising in social security at ACOSS, COVID-19 presented a big challenge. As a peak organisation, ACOSS engaged with the Federal Government to ensure it was doing all it could to support people affected by the pandemic, including lifting and broadening access to income support.

Importantly, ACOSS's campaign to increase unemployment payments had the backing of a wide cross-section of the Australian community, including businesses, unions, academics, and other stakeholders, as well as a majority of voters. However, because payment increases in light of COVID were temporary, ACOSS focused on convincing the government to not cut payments to below the poverty line. ACOSS supported people to share their personal stories of living on income support to demonstrate why the government could not return payments to their pre-COVID rates.

“People on payments have really been the heart and soul of the campaign,” Crowe explained, adding: “The key thing that people have been doing, which has been helping the campaign enormously, is sharing their stories publicly, whether that be through mainstream media or on social media, and sharing them with us, so we can promote those stories ourselves.” Crowe also stressed the importance of connecting people receiving payments with policymakers. ACOSS focused on supporting people to meet and speak directly with politicians as it is “always more impactful” when politicians hear directly from people affected.

ACOSS is also intent on pushing back against the problematic “narrative around people who were unemployed before COVID and people who lost their jobs because of COVID.” Prime Minister Scott Morrison framed his government's response as helping those who “through no fault of their own”³⁵ found themselves without work, reinforcing much of the stigma traditionally associated with receiving unemployment benefits. The rhetoric the Federal Government has used to contrast people losing their job as a result of the pandemic works to reinforce the traditional stigma associated with a person receiving unemployment benefits. It recalls debates deeply rooted in Australian history pertaining to the “deserving and undeserving poor,” positioning post-COVID welfare recipients as more deserving of support. An absence of political will to reform the social welfare system remains a big hurdle, although Crowe acknowledged that the ground is shifting, explaining: “I think we're really close but not there yet.” ACOSS's campaign is focused on ensuring no one lives in poverty, whether they have lost their job and are receiving unemployment payments, or cannot get a job because they are looking after children, have a disability or are studying.



What Helps Civil Society Advocacy Be More Effective?

Emerging from academic research and relational interviews with civil society leaders about their experiences with COVID-19 in trying to better advocate and exert influence on behalf of people and communities are three key practices, or capabilities, which can be utilised to drive change.

How do we actually build the right infrastructure and system to keep working in these much more agile and quicker ways, as opposed to putting out a list of the next ten Royal Commissions we need to have?

Carolyn Curtis, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation³⁶

Focusing on Impact

Most modern advocacy organisations make use of strategic planning tools, such as theories of change or logic models. Leading advocacy scholars Sheldon Gen and Amy Conley Wright noted that these tools help organisations work backwards from what they

are trying to achieve in a broad sense and devise a series of activities which advocates believe will help them achieve impact.³⁷ Various other tools assist in the shaping and refining these overarching strategies. Community alliances in the tradition of Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, for example, make use of power-mapping to prioritise key stakeholders, creating strong and unique public stories and narratives, and building strong relationships across difference.³⁸

Two key relationships that for-purpose organisations need to constantly navigate when it comes to advocacy is their relationship with decision makers, typically governments, and their relationship with those for whom they are advocating. Through a lens of power, those in control such as governments may be resistant to profound systemic change and prefer more incremental changes, particularly changes which they perceive will strengthen their political position and allow them to maintain power. Civil society organisations which are perceived to be too close to governments, or more interested in building power bases of their own, are likely to have shallow relationships with people and communities and be unable to mobilise support if required.

Creating emotional triggers, such as anger and outrage, can be effective mobilising tools for

advocacy organisations – for turning out people to public action, getting signatures on an e-petition or securing large numbers of donations. And yet these tactics can damage relationships with people and organisations who might be interested in solving similar problems but come to the table with a different set of experiences, such as the business community. The Front Project's CEO Jane Hunt said: "When I started working with business leaders around social issues, a lot of them would say things like, 'Oh, you guys are so morally superior. You have a language around these things, and if we step over the line, you come down really hard on us, and we can't ask dumb questions.'"³⁹

 ***I think that the not-for-profit sector has taken moral outrage to a level where it actually stops people having really good, honest conversations about what's happening. I say to a lot of not-for-profits - which they don't like - moral outrage is not a strategy. It might give you energy to do something, but actually, it's not a strategy that anyone likes to be on the receiving end of, right? It doesn't help anybody meet them where they're at, or help them think through issues.***

Jane Hunt, *The Front Project*⁴⁰

Typically, the more that an advocacy strategy is grounded in and focused on a specific community need the better. First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) CEO Damien Griffis summarised the sentiment in a seminar on advocacy relating to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) when he said, "If it doesn't include the voices of people with disability, it lacks legitimacy."⁴¹ Tactics then take a wide variety of forms, depending on the circumstances. As a large government-funded service provider, Settlement Services International consciously works within a network, leveraging political and industry relationships while collaborating with and supporting more external-facing advocacy groups.⁴² Similarly, FPDN are focused on their specific role as "advocating for a social model of disability" based on the

unique experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability; the group is then able to exert influence disproportionate to their organisation's size within processes such as the Disability Royal Commission.⁴³

During COVID-19, for example, Democracy in Colour strategically shifted their focus from campaigning around racism in media representation, realising that a lot of others were doing effective work in this area, and instead worked to ensure that people without government support had a stronger voice in urgent advocacy campaigns across the country.⁴⁴ Former Soccerero Craig Foster, creator of Play for Lives, made use of his political, sporting and media connections to build COVID-19 volunteer capacity, going down to Addison Road Community Organisation and saying, "'Okay, I'm going to bring sport on site here to tell that story publicly to facilitate and amplify it and bring everyone else on board'."⁴⁵

Putting People and Communities First

It may seem obvious and logical to have the needs of people and communities as the focal point for advocacy. Yet there are many barriers, pressures and pitfalls involved in this endeavour. The broad challenge for organisations, according to Jenny Onyx and colleagues, is to "maintain the participation of their constituencies on the ground while attending to managerial imperatives and contractual constraints imposed from 'the top'. Whether advocacy takes the form of resistance or influence, is soft or openly challenging, claims of accountability and a legitimate mandate to represent marginalised voices depends on activities that include those voices."⁴⁶



According to City of Sydney Councillor Jess Scully, a distinct challenge is that Australia, and in particular Sydney, is extremely “polarised economically and socially,” which creates significant hurdles in trying to create conversations and forums where people are able to get an appreciation of and empathy for other people’s experiences.⁴⁷

It is also crucial to ensure that some people’s experiences are not being exploited for the gains of others. Scholars Sheldon Gen and Amy Conley Wright suggested that “framing policy targets in a favourable light is an effective target for gaining policy support.”⁴⁸ Photo and video images of people, along with their personal stories, create compelling content for media organisations, politicians, charities and corporations looking to increase clicks, votes, sales or donations; so it is important for advocates to ensure these relationships and power dynamics are not exploitative or, in the worse cases, re-traumatising. As Jane Hunt of The Front Project warned, “there is a difference between elevating a voice, because you’re still choosing the voice that gets elevated, and then enabling them to choose how they want to be organised and how they want to be prioritised.”⁴⁹

Author, practitioner and academic Clare Land noted that non-Indigenous advocates keen to work on issues relating to justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities should also be sensitive to the risk that many activities they might regard as straightforward advocacy, including research, derives from an extremely colonial lens. By demanding people to share their personal experiences, there is a potential for re-traumatisation or a recreation of colonial hierarchies of power. Land explained that effort is required to unlearn ways of being and doing, and conducting work in ways that are culturally safe and respect cultural authority.⁵⁰ Similarly, advocates and advocacy organisations who work with potentially vulnerable communities, such as people with intellectual disabilities, victim-survivors of violence, and children or young people, are required to tread a fine line between protecting the people they are working with from potential harm and acting as paternalistic gatekeepers who believe that they understand what is in someone else’s best interest. In-depth and consequence-free conversations about informed consent are crucial for navigating this delicate dynamic.⁵¹

Conscious of these challenges, many for-purpose organisations, such as ACOSS, remunerate participants with low incomes and experience of poverty for their participation as spokespeople.⁵² Some non-profits and NGOs with a community organising framework, work to identify and support advocates from within the communities they are there to serve. The Sydney Alliance’s Voices for Power project, for example, strives to “build leaders in diverse migrant and ethnic communities across Sydney” so that people can develop the skills and connections to exert power and influence on their own behalf, as opposed to the more traditional path of advocating *for* someone.⁵³ The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) sees their service provision as a “gateway to advocacy.” During the 2020 lockdown across public housing estates, the Victorian Government’s Work for Victoria initiative aimed to “uncover the experiences of people through COVID lockdown and the pandemic”, BSL responded by communicating to the government what policy changes or service interventions were needed, while at the same time, “still shining light on and capturing people’s aspirations, what their goals are and how they want to achieve them.”

The people with the greatest capacity for being heard and understanding how the system works, live a very refined... how do I put it? They're at the very top of Maslow's Pyramid and they are expecting it to be polished at all times. They have no connection to what everyone else is experiencing down at the bottom. And when we have those writers' festivals or those community consultations or whatever, we hear from those people. And these people are having society shaped to their benefit, and they have no interest in, or active aversion to, the people at the other end of the spectrum, or a very clear paternalistic idea of how they should be managed.
Anonymous participant⁵⁴

Being Prepared to Act Quickly to Achieve Change

Quickly evolving circumstances can mean that policy changes that were impossible one day become inevitable the next. Doubling the rate of unemployment benefits in Australia was a pipe dream that no one was advocating for before the economic crisis of the pandemic forced the Federal Government’s hand. The shooting massacre at Port Arthur in Tasmania in 1996 lowered the policy threshold and led to the introduction of national gun control laws in a way that seemed impossible before or since. Emotion-charged events such as shark attacks or public violence frequently prompt the introduction of laws which have little or no evidence base.⁵⁵ Whatever the issue at hand, advocates need to be prepared to both take advantage of evolving circumstances and defend existing rights.⁵⁶

COVID-19 was clearly one of those moments, following closely on the heels of another – the devastating fires of the summer of 2019-20. Many of the civil society leaders that we spoke to observed how in the initial stages of the bushfire crisis, organisations working and having on-the-ground relationships in areas such as community health, disability, and First Nations justice struggled to be heard. Eventually, governments realised that they could not do it on their own and began engaging with organisations, which meant that when COVID-19 hit, many new relationships had already begun





to be forged, helping to see some needs of certain vulnerable populations being actively considered in a way they would not have been twelve months earlier.

It is often much harder to try to establish the relationships needed to advocate successfully once the crisis hits. Anandini Saththianathan, from the Paul Ramsay Foundation observed, “Organisations with pre-existing relationships have been the most influential.”⁵⁷ Asthma Australia CEO Michele Goldman, who tries to approach working with government in the way she would like them to work – collaboratively – noted how the beginning of the pandemic was “such a moving feast, new things were coming to the fore all the time.” She saw that the government needed support from civil society for “understanding and keeping abreast of what the key issues are for the community at any one time.”⁵⁸ Jane Hunt of the Front Project had a similar observation about working with government noting, “our best in was through pre-existing relationships, data and insights.” She also noted that “What has been illuminating in this time with government is that they won’t negotiate with anyone who is negatively loud or vocal in the media, and in fact will actively shut them out.”⁵⁹

“Fortune favours the well-prepared,” observed Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) CEO Jonathon Hunyor at a focus group on advocacy and influence. Among PIAC’s varying activities is

the NSW Government-funded Homeless Person’s Legal Service, including StreetCare, a program which focuses on building the advocacy capacity of people with lived experience of homelessness. For many years, the PIAC team had been trying to get the voices of lived experience in the room with policymakers, and Jonathon observed that COVID-19 saw government become especially receptive to the input of StreetCare members.⁶⁰

The landscape has in part shifted because government has had to engage differently. They have recognised that they need expertise that they don’t have. May Miller Dawkins, researcher, advocate and coalition builder⁶¹

While it was a different experience for those working with people and communities which the government was choosing not to support, preparation remained vital for success. From nearly a decade of community organising with a broad coalition of faith groups, workers’ unions and community service providers, the Sydney Alliance had the relationships in place to mobilise support for international students and other temporary visa holders. According to Hunyor, “During COVID, a lot of advocacy has become focused because we’d stopped arguing about nonsense.”⁶²

Key Principles for More Impactful Advocacy and Influence

As crises continue to emerge, non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations have a vested interest in understanding how they can more effectively advocate, wield influence and shift decision makers towards positive change for social good.

As is the case for many other capability areas, taking the time to develop and maintain connections and relationships is essential for successful advocacy. This includes: the people and communities most affected by the issues at hand; the partnerships, coalitions and alliances formed with other organisations to campaign around core issues; as well as with governments and other decision makers responsible for legislating and implementing change. Particularly in times of crisis, the strength of our existing connections and relationships allows us to mobilise effectively and ensure that public policy decisions truly reflect the needs and aspirations of people and communities.

Important principles emerged while exploring the question of what helps to drive successful advocacy and achieve systemic change. These are set out below:

- (1) In a strong democracy, civil society is a crucial avenue for constructive debate that can inform and shift public policy. If governments are overly hostile to feedback and try to stifle dissent, people and organisations can become risk-averse when it comes to challenging entrenched power.
- (2) Advocacy is a strategic and collaborative activity. A clear focus on the desired outcome determines where power needs to be shifted, what relationships need to be built, and then what specific tactics could be best employed to create the argument for change.
- (3) It is essential to involve those affected by disadvantage in advocacy. This extends beyond token activities like consultation or using people's stories, to organisational support and respect for community leadership, and deeper involvement in deciding advocacy priorities and strategies.



While the experience of COVID-19 saw some advocacy wins for civil society organisations and communities, the pandemic also threw up multiple challenges which point towards the need for further research and discussion. If civil society organisations are going to fulfil their goal to help shape society and improve the lives of people and communities who suffer disadvantage, these principles suggest that practitioners, funders and decision makers will need to reflect and ask themselves a series of potentially challenging questions.

Civil society organisations and practitioners will have to take a close look at their advocacy practices and ask what purpose they serve; how effective they are; and whether the input from people experiencing disadvantage or discrimination is genuine or simply token. Funders can help shape the answers to these questions by supporting people and organisations to develop advocacy skills, including the skills of people to advocate for themselves. Governments also have an important role to play. Rather than viewing civil society organisations as in conflict or opposition with government, governments need to create opportunities for open discussion and debate around policy decisions that impact people's lives, appreciating the role that civil society plays in empowering people to work together on the issues that impact them most.



CONCLUSION

Conclusion: Nurturing Links Across Civil Society

The experiences of 2020 and 2021 will live long in the memory of countries across the world. When each of us first heard of COVID-19, very few of us could have imagined the upheaval and heartbreak that it would unleash on so many. In response, we have seen people and communities in every nation respond with extraordinary courage and tenacity, seeking to ensure that the damage the pandemic has wreaked is contained and that we are able to rebuild our societies and economies back stronger for the future. Here in Australia, civil society organisations led the way in that effort. Whether it was opening food service centres, innovating to ensure that services continued to be delivered, checking in on elderly neighbours or devising programs to vaccinate the vulnerable, we have witnessed fantastic creativity and the true spirit of community. It has been inspiring for our research team to hear these stories and to document them for posterity.

Civil society organisations also, struggled at times, as we all did. The demands of moving to new ways of working, the difficulties of staying in touch with communities, the increased expectations on leaders and advocates, all weighed heavy on those working across the sector. At many times during this research process, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society team have spoken with people who have been working harder than at any point in their career and often still felt that they were not achieving what they wished to on behalf of those that they sought to serve.

The research team has heard of the new ideas that bubbled to the surface and has presented potential changes to the way in which civil society organisations work and to the supports that civil society receives from government and philanthropy. All of these ideas originated in the sector itself, often in the rare moments of reflection that civil society leaders found among the chaos and demands of the pandemic. In what has gone before, we have set out those specific lessons for each of our capability areas. We have presented, new ideas for leadership; community connection; networks and systems; and advocacy. The

research team believes each of the capability areas are important and will stimulate debate across civil society. In the future of the Strengthening Australian Civil Society project, the team shall seek feedback on each of the areas from across Australia.

In addition to these specific suggestions, the research team wishes to set out a list of recommendations for those who work in and care for Australian civil society to consider in the year ahead. They are laid out below:

Implications for civil society organisations

- (1) Organisations should develop or renew their strategies and plans to deepen collaborations and share power with communities beyond the organisation itself.** Throughout our research, we heard again and again how the strongest and most resilient organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic were those who had the deepest ties to those they were set up to serve or represent. Organisations which struggled were often those who had looser relationships, especially those that were focusing on direct service provision and little else. Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers propose here that each organisation take some time after the pandemic to reflect on strategies which would enable them to deepen their community connection, in order to be able to sustain themselves with greater ease in the next inevitable moment of crisis.
- (2) Larger organisations should consider how to share power and resources to create opportunities and platforms for smaller organisations and communities.** Again, the research team heard civil society leaders and practitioners speak passionately about the advantages of building strong systems and networks across the sector, but that the imbalance of power, influence and resources often makes this kind of network connection difficult. We therefore encourage the sector as a whole

to consider how there can be greater sharing of expertise and resources, and a deeper sense of partnership and collaboration between larger and smaller organisations. Internal strategy or reflection sessions within larger organisations would be a good place for this work to begin.

Implications for legislators and policymakers

- (3) **Encourage advocacy and constructive criticism from across civil society.** Some of the most creative and inspiring moments during the pandemic came in the early months when government, both federally and in the states, listened carefully to the concerns of civil society organisations and innovated accordingly. Bold and new policies, including the creation of the job retention program JobKeeper, the up-tick in income support payments, including JobSeeker, and radical and far-reaching support for childcare, followed. The research team therefore encourages government at all levels to continue engaging with civil society organisations during the next stage of the pandemic and beyond. This should include being willing to encourage civil society organisations to advocate strongly and with passion in public where there are honest and important disagreements.
- (4) **Devolve strategic decision-making to local communities.** The analysis of the effectiveness of civil society activity during the pandemic lends further support to the idea that interventions in support of disadvantaged communities are best led by communities themselves or those in close and direct relationship with them. This was powerfully seen in the example of the First Nations response to the pandemic in its early months and in the discussion of the debacles in the Melbourne Towers. The Strengthening Australian Civil Society team believe, therefore, that this should encourage government at all levels to continue to deepen its work in direct partnership with communities, delegating authority and decision-making to them wherever it is practicable to do so.

Implications for philanthropists and other funders

- (5) **Increase funding for intermediaries and hubs.** The civil society leaders involved in this project have been unambiguous in their commitment to deepening the relationships among themselves and to maintaining strong networks and connections after COVID-19. Many have also noted that intermediary organisations and less formal hub systems make it far easier to sustain those networks. Intermediaries are able to introduce civil society organisation leaders to each other, encourage and enable them to stay in touch, sharing information, resources and influence as they do so. They can also broker relationships where they may be strained. Despite the importance of this work, however, relatively few philanthropic foundations have designated funding for intermediaries or hubs of this kind. The evidence presented here suggests that such funding would be warmly welcomed in the sector and could play a vital role in enhancing civil society capability.
- (6) **Increase funding for organisational collaboration and relationship building.** In addition to the institutional support offered by intermediaries and hubs, civil society organisations often invest in developing cultures of collaboration and the relationship skills of their staff and leadership. The experience of COVID-19 demonstrated the exceptional importance of this work, with each of the four capability areas – leadership, community connection, networks and advocacy and influence – being strengthened when organisations were able to collaborate effectively and create deep and sustained relationships with multiple and diverse others. Despite this, however, there is again relatively little philanthropic funding available at present to support this work and to introduce Australian civil society organisations to best practice internationally. Therefore, on the basis of this research, the Strengthening Australian Civil Society team would encourage Australian philanthropic foundations to invest more heavily in the skills required to maintain and deepen relationships across time and place.

I Appendix: Our Partners in Research

The Strengthening Australian Civil Society research team is extremely grateful to the following people for making the time to share their ideas and experiences through being part of interviews, focus groups and review panels.

- Maha Abdo – CEO, Muslim Women Australia
- Kirsty Albion – Executive Director, Australian Progress
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- Rosanna Barbero – CEO, Addison Road Community Organisation (ARCO)
- Laura Barnes – Convener, Australia Together
- David Barrow – Lead Organiser, Sydney Alliance
- Moo Baulch – Director of Primary Prevention, Women and Girls Emergency Centre (WAGEC)
- Marion Bennet – Executive, Mission Australia
- Tessa Boyd-Caine – CEO, Health Justice Australia
- Marcela Brassett – Media Manager, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
- Laura Breslin – National Manager Service Design & Innovation, Mission Australia
- Theresa Brierly – Steering Committee, Hunter Community Alliance
- Mark Cabaj – Associate, Tamarack Institute
- Elizabeth Cham – Board Chair, Australian and New Zealand Third Sector Research (ANZTSR)
- Mark Connelly – Head of Brand and Communication, GetUp!
- Lee Cooper – Founder, RadicalBox
- Charmaine Crowe – Program Director, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)
- Carolyn Curtis – CEO, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI)
- Penny Dakin – CEO, Australian Research for Children and Youth (ARACY)
- Tara Day-Williams – Director, Stronger Places, Stronger People, Australian Department of Social Services
- Bassina Farbenblum – Co-Director, Migrant Worker Justice Initiative
- James Farrell – General Manager, Cancer Council Queensland
- Regina Featherstone – Solicitor, Redfern Legal Centre
- Craig Foster – Founder, Play for Lives; Ambassador, Addison Road Community Organisation (ARCO)
- Clinton Free – Professor and Academic Director, Sydney Business School, University of Sydney
- Elise Ganley – Organiser, Queensland Community Alliance
- El Gibbs – disability advocate and activist
- Caterina Giorgi – Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)
- Jason Glanville – Australian Indigenous Governance Institute
- Michele Goldman – CEO, Asthma Australia
- Susan Goodwin – Professor, Social Policy, University of Sydney
- Kerry Graham – Co-Founder & Director, Collaboration for Impact (CFI)
- Michelle Higelin – Executive Director, ActionAid
- Julie Hourigan Ruse – CEO, Fams
- Jane Hunt – CEO, The Front Project
- Jonathon Hunyor – CEO, Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC)
- Devett Kennedy – Lead Organiser, Queensland Community Alliance
- Keiran Kevans – Coordinator, Glebe Youth Service
- Paul Kidson – Lecturer, University of Wollongong
- Steve Kinmond – CEO, Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies (ACWA)
- Justin Koonin – President, ACON Health
- Michael Kunz – Lead, Migrant Support Program, Australian Red Cross
- Tu Le – Program Director, Migrant Employment Legal Service
- Magnus Linder – State Disaster Recovery Coordinator, Anglicare
- Angus Lonergan – Child and Youth Engagement Manager, Unicef Australia
- Colin Long – Board Member, Hope Cooperative; Just Transitions Organiser, Victoria Trades Hall Council
- Edwina MacDonald – Deputy CEO and Director of Policy and Advocacy, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)
- Julie Macken – Research and Project Officer, Catholic Diocese of Sydney
- Néha Madhok – National Director, Democracy in Colour
- Emma Maiden – Head of Advocacy and Media, Uniting
- Amity Mara – Organising Director, Democracy in Colour
- Peter Mares – Lead Moderator, Cranlana Centre

- for Ethical Leadership
- Kim McAlister – Senior Manager, Strategic Partnerships, Brotherhood of St Lawrence
- Emma McGarrity – Director of Mobilisation, GetUp!
- May Miller-Dawkins – Research Fellow, Centre for Policy Development
- Donnella Mills – Chair, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (NACCHO)
- Nick Moraitis – CEO, Foundation for Young Australians (FYA)
- Mark Mordue – Media and Communications Manager, Addison Road Community Organisation (ARCO)
- Sanushka Mudaliar – consultant, Addison Road Community Organisation (ARCO)
- Thuy Linh Nguyen – Project Lead, Voices for Power, Sydney Alliance
- Diana Olmos – Community Organiser and Project Manager, Sydney Alliance
- Leo Patterson Ross – CEO, The Tenants’ Union of NSW (TUNSW)
- Miriam Pellicano – Executive Manager, House of Welcome
- Elizabeth Pellicano – Professor, Macquarie School of Education, Macquarie University
- Ann Porcino – Founder and Director, RPR Consulting
- Joanna Quilty – CEO, NSW Council of Social Services (NCOSS)
- Asha Ramzan – Executive Officer, Sydney Community Forum
- Nishadh Rego – Policy, Advocacy and Communications Manager, Jesuit Refugee Services
- Skye Riggs – Founder, Ripple
- John Robertson – NSW & ACT Chief Executive Officer, Foodbank
- Zoe Robinson – NSW Advocate for Children and Young People
- Violet Roumeliotis – CEO, Settlement Services International (SSI)
- Anandini Saththianathan – Head of Sector Capability, Paul Ramsay Foundation
- Jess Scully – Deputy Lord Mayor, City of Sydney
- Anisha Senaratne – Racial Justice and Refugees Organiser, GetUp!
- Liz Skelton – Co-founder and Director, Collaborate for Impact (CFI)
- Thea Snow – Director, Centre for Public Impact
- Will Somerville – Program Director, Unbound Philanthropy
- Sophie Stewart – Campaign Coordinator, Social Reinvestment WA
- Martin Stewart-Weeks – Founder and Principal, Public Purpose
- Anita Tang – Organising Director, Centre for Australian Progress
- Amanda Tattersall – Research and Education Lead, Sydney Policy Lab, University of Sydney
- Jo Taylor – Chief Capability Officer, Paul Ramsay Foundation
- Erin Turner – Director of Campaigns and Communication, CHOICE.
- Dame Julia Unwin – Chair, Civil Society Futures
- Karen Walsh – CEO, Venture Housing Company
- Roger West – Director and Principal Consultant, WestWood Spice
- Ashlee Wone – Manager of Policy and Government Relations, First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN)
- Amy Conley Wright – Associate Professor, Social Work and Policy Studies, University of Sydney
- Olivia Wright – Industry Development Manager, New South Wales Council of Social Services (NCOSS)
- Paul Wright – National Director, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR)
- Can Yasmut – Executive Officer, Local Community Services Association (LCSA)

Notes

Opening Sections

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Final Sections

- 1 People have participated in the research as individuals, providing their own view, not those of their organisations. The job titles and organisations listed relate to those held by the individual at the time and may have changed.

