

Civil Society Capability - Advocacy and Influence





The Sydney Policy Lab, supported by the Paul Ramsey Foundation, has launched the Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative. This bold new project aims to capture and share insights for a strong and re-energised Australian civil society.

The first major research report from the Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative was released in February 2022: the report *Nurturing Links Across Civil Society – Lessons from Australia's For Profit Sector's Response to COVID-19*.

The research report focused on identifying insights for civil society organisations, policy makers and funders' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It engaged a wide range of people and organisations across Australia.

This summary is one in a series which includes extracts from that major research report. It highlights one of the key capability areas essential for those working to build and support strong and resilient communities – advocacy and influence.

It identifies barriers, enablers and opportunities to developing advocacy as a practice and offers recommendations for those interested in strengthening civil society capability.

To read the full research report, or to access the other summary reports and stories collected by the Strengthening Australian Civil Society project, [visit the Sydney Policy Lab website](#).



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.



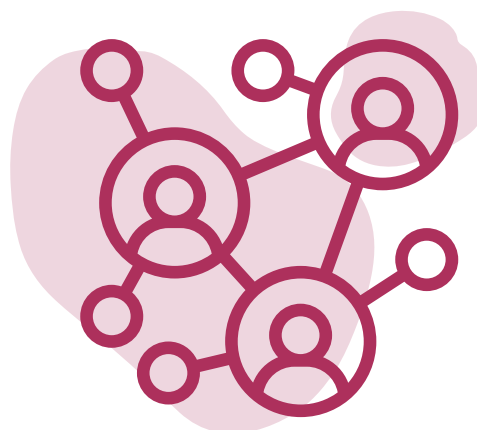
STRENGTHENING
AUSTRALIAN
CIVIL SOCIETY

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.

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 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 observes 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, for what Vromen calls “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 that scholars Jenny Onyx and colleagues explore whereby “overt political advocacy is repressed and in decline.”⁶ They observe 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

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

Based on this research, 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 or 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 forces seen to create barriers to effective advocacy and hold them in place.

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 thirty 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 attacks which are designed to restrict their 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 adverse 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 where that makes sense”.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 to which we spoke, that can be an unrealistic or at best 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 areas of policy and legislation which may need reform.

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 and Asylum Seeker 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 says.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, recognising the important role that they play in supporting families, workers, and business.

Hunt notes though 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, Jane prioritises working with all parts of the system.

She points 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.” She reflects 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 increased during the pandemic, with impacted people robbed of a voice to inform crisis-related policy.

Hunt sees 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 highlights the importance of reflecting on what civil society can do differently, together, to incite change. And what do we need to demand of the political system to facilitate this?

Going it Alone

In addition to the constraints posed by reliance on government funding, many of the civil society leaders and practitioners we 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 imagine it is easier to go it alone.

The broader overall shift in how people engage in politics over the last forty years lends support for 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 and related actions. 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. Moyer understands that 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 identifies 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 observe 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 told us that they believe it also remains essential to communicate the broader systemic repercussions relating to people’s individual experiences. Communications research around racism in the USA recommends that advocates “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, New Zealand research 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. In this way, advocacy scholars Sheldon Gen and Amy Conley Wright discuss 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 for example 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 note the importance of telling personal stories for getting media coverage, which can make it hard to draw attention to larger and more systemic issues. As one argued:





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 Colour³²

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 facilitate amateur professional sportspeople volunteering 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 sees 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 enjoys the backing of a wide cross section of the Australian community, including business, union, academic, 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,” Charmaine 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.” Charmaine also stresses the importance of connecting people receiving payments with policy makers. ACOSS focused on supporting people to speak directly with politicians, ideally getting meetings, reflecting that 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 uses 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 the big hurdle, although Charmaine acknowledges 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 lost their job and receive 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 our academic research and relational interviews with civil society leaders about their experiences with COVID-19 and 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

Focussing 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 note 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 a 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 observed that: *"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, and then help them think through issues.***
Jane Hunt, The Front Project⁴⁰

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 NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) 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 Socceroo 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 Centre 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 depend 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. Sheldon Gen and Amy Conley Wright suggest 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 that this relationship and power dynamic 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 notes 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, derive from an extremely colonial lens. There is potential for retraumatisation such as by demanding people share their personal experiences or recreating colonial hierarchies of power. Land explains there is also effort required to unlearn ways of being and doing to conduct 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 Work for Victoria initiative assisted to "uncover the experiences of people through COVID lockdown and the pandemic" which in turn helped BSL communicate 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 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 policy makers, and Jonathon observed that COVID-19 saw government 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 affective 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 and raise their voice about the issues that impact them most.

I Conclusion and Recommendations

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 wreaks is contained and that we are able to build 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, however, struggled at times, as we all did. The demands of moving to new ways of working, the difficulties of staying in touch with all communities, and the pressures of dramatically increased expectations on leaders and advocates, all weighed heavy on those working across the sector. At many times during this research process, we 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.

We have heard too of the new ideas that bubbled to the surface at this time. Throughout this report, we have 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 those 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, that is, new ideas for leadership; community connection; networks and

systems; and advocacy. Each of those, we believe, is important and we hope very much that they will stimulate debate across civil society. In the next year of our project, we shall seek feedback on each of them from across Australia, before drawing them together again for our final report.

In addition, to these specific suggestions, we wish also to set out a final series of overall recommendations that we hope those who work in and care for Australian civil society will 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 focussing on direct service provision and little else. We 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, throughout the research we heard civil society leaders and practitioners speak passionately about the advantages of building strong systems and networks across the sector. We also heard it said, however, that the imbalance in 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 policy makers

- (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. We therefore encourage government at all levels to continue to engage 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 between them and the government.
- (4) **Devolve strategic decision-making to local communities.** The analysis of the effectiveness of civil society activity during the pandemic presented in this report lends further to support to the idea that interventions in support of disadvantaged communities are best led by those either from those communities themselves or 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. We 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 our four capability areas – leadership, community connection, networks and advocacy – 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. On the basis of our research, therefore, we would encourage Australian philanthropic foundations to invest more heavily in the skills required to maintain and deepen relationships across time and place.

Notes

Capability Area 4: Advocacy and Influence

- 1 Advocacy and Influence focus group, facilitated by the Sydney Policy Lab, August 5, 2020.
- 2 See, for example, Linda Donaldson, "Advocacy by Nonprofit Human Service Agencies: Organizational Factors as Correlates to Advocacy Behavior", *Journal of Community Practice* 15, no.3 (2007): 139-158; Sheldon Gen and Amy Conley Wright, *Nonprofits in policy advocacy: their strategies and stories* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Ariadne Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017).
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- 4 Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement*, 234.
- 5 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing Them Home – Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (April, 1997).
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- 7 Onyx et al., "Advocacy with Gloves on," 56.
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- 16 Lee Cooper, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, January 28, 2021.
- 17 Asha Ramzan, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 9, 2020.
- 18 Tessa Boyd-Caine, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 3, 2020.
- 19 Violet Roumeliotis, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 10, 2021.
- 20 Jane Hunt, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 8, 2020; Community Connection focus group, facilitated by The Sydney Policy Lab, December 2, 2020; Advocacy and Influence focus group, August 5, 2020.
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- 22 Onyx et al., "Advocacy with Gloves on," 41-61, 58.
- 23 Ashlee Wone, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 20, 2020.
- 24 Néha Madhok, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 4, 2021.
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- 27 Marianne Elliott and Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw, "How to Talk About Crime and Justice: A Guide" (guide, The Workshop, August 2020).
- 28 Gen and Wright, *Nonprofits in policy advocacy*, xiii.
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- 30 Augustine Zycher, "Through no fault of their own," Probono Australia, last modified May 6, 2020.
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- 44 Néha Madhok, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 2, 2021.

- 45 Craig Foster, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, January 31, 2021.
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About Strengthening Australian Civil Society

Strengthening Australian Civil Society is a bold new initiative which aims to build a stronger and reenergised 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 Director, Professor Marc Stears.

Advisory Panel: Anandini Sathianathan, Anita Tang, Devett Kennedy, Edwina MacDonald, Jason Glanville, Dame Julie Unwin OBE, Liz Skelton, Maha Abdo OAM and Tara Day-Williams

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

[Download and read the full report via the Sydney Policy Lab website](#)



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