Civil Society Capability - Systems and Networks

STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

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 – systems and networks.

It identifies barriers, enablers and opportunities to working in systems and networks 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.
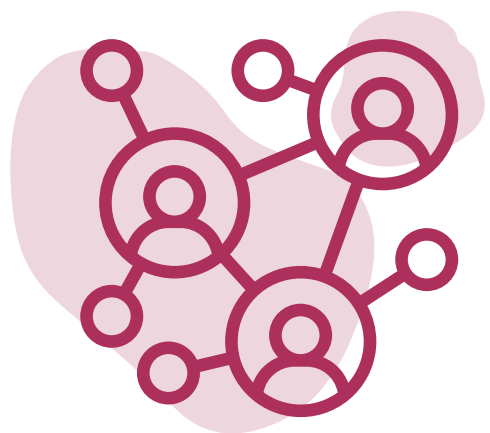
STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

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 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 decisionmakers?

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-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 phenomenon, 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 uses 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 note 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 begin 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 capability areas, or 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 the 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 organizational one. Thus, in order to have impact, civil society leaders must balance the needs of their organization 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 unfortunately the reality does not always match up to the rhetoric.

Through our conversations with civil society leaders about their experiences of trying to provide communities with the supports they needed during COVID-19, the Sydney Policy Lab has identified three key structural barriers which are perceived to frustrate 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 percent of charities have 80 percent 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,** *RadicalBox[14]*

Expecting one Person or Organisation can *Do it All*

One of the clear benefits of working in networks is the idea of strength in capacity, and experiences during the pandemic suggest that places that 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 explain 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, as can be communities and sectors where these connections and networks aren't 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 push them into competition and opposition with each other. A 2020 Sydney Policy Lab study of the shift to commissioning in NSW notes 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 in the research 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 and not considering the 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 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 Australia[20]*

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, McAllister noted that: "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

connects these ideas to *bottom-up* approaches to 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 highlights the importance of developing what he calls interconnected *Human Learning Systems* in which effective systems are underpinned not by prescriptive policies designed behind closed doors by supposed experts, but instead by trusting relationships.[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 organisations[26] 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. If 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 International[28]

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

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 notes, "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 supporting 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 or require support in areas of child protection and family violence. To help these people, "the broad networks are critical," Roumeliotis says. "You really need to tap into resources, because federal funded settlement services don't allow for those specialisations."

Roumeliotis notes the futility of trying to do everything independently necessitates being part of a broader network. "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 *New Power*, Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans describe 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 describes 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 observes 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 notes 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] This is necessary, Land observes, 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 takes 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 to make connections to 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 Together[38]*

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. McAllister notes the importance of hearing the voices of people themselves because "we can't make an assumption than an organisation or one or two people can talk on behalf of others."[39] Queensland-based civil society leader James Farrell, reflecting on the effectiveness of community-based mutual aid during COVID-19, 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. "One of the biggest challenges that we have as a society," she says, "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 highlight that the difference between taking a competitive or a collaborative approach can boil down to our perceptions of what motivates others. They note 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 that people "come to a relationship from a more public-spirited motivational base," leans 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 thus 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, including fragmentation and disconnection

across the system that cuts off important flows of information through "an incentive to withhold rather than share knowledge," creating a lack of understanding about what does and does not work, service and administrative duplication and a lack of 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, the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, found that part practices, including competitive tendering, had undermined trust and relationships across the sector. This created barriers to moving to a more collaborative approach to human service design and delivery, including organisations being heavily focused on the financial survival of their own organisation.[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. He described a contradiction for example in how the Federal Government works with mental health NGOs, for example: "[Federal Health Minister] Greg Hunt and others want them to go off and collaborate, and then the government allocates resources in a way that guarantees that 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. And 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 Forum[47]

Multiple research participants observed reduced competition between governments, funders, and service providers during COVID-19, particularly due to increased funding and the permission given by funders for 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 many 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 investing in creating new services to meet them, including self-funding to become accredited to 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 Together*[53]

Prioritising relationships

Working and collaborating with others takes time – as famed leadership coach Stephen M.R. Covey notes, "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, too-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 that 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 Australia*[55]

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] Further, 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 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 ensure 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 says. 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 she observed, 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 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 organizations of a letterhead in support of, or against, an issue".[62] Tattersall observes that two core aspects of successfully 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 observe 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 describes 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 kind of 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 to see 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

they shift to online ways of working opened up opportunities for learning. The Sydney Alliance, for example, 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 Kearney 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, Ashlee explains that 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," Kearney 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 conversation such as those facilitated by Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative. Asthma Australia CEO Michelle Goldman observed that she made "sure in a crazy day that I made the 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 power, 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, saying "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, raised by our participants, 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 highlights 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 observe 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 this organisation acted as an intermediary, convening and resourcing a network of more than forty 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 Australia[77]

Collaboration for Impact (CFI) also acts 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 sharing 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 the 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 can 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 ensure 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 organization plays in the larger ecosystem and considering in 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 they 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.

▌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 3: Systems and Networks

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2   Oanh (Olena) Thi Kim Nguyen & Varsha Devi Balakrishnan, "International students in Australia – during and after COVID-19," *Higher Education Research & Development* 39, no. 7 (2020): 1372-1376.

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4   Donella Meadows, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System* (The Sustainability Institute, 1999).

5   John Kania, Mark Kramer and Peter Senge, *The Waters of Systems Change* (FSG: Reimagining Social Change, June 2018).

6   Ibid.

7   Paul Ormerod, *Positive Linking: How Networks Can Revolutionise the World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012): 290.

8   Janine O'Flynn and Gary Sturgess, *2030 and beyond: Getting the work of government done, an ANZSOG research paper for the Australian Public Service Review Panel* (March, 2019).

9   Jenny Onyx, Lisa Armitage, Bronwen Dalton, Rose Melville, John Casey and Robin Banks, "Advocacy with Gloves on: The "Manners" of Strategy Used by Some Third Sector Organizations Undertaking Advocacy in NSW and Queensland," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 21, no.1 (2010): 41-61; Susan Goodwin and Ruth Phillips, "The marketisation of human services and the expansion of the not-for-profit sector," *Markets, Rights and Power in Australian Social Policy,* ed. Susan Goodwin and Gabrielle Meagher (Sydney University Press, 2015).

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13   Jason Mogus and Tom Liacus, *Networked Change: How progressive campaigns are won in the 21st Century* (NetChange Consulting, 2016).

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15   See e.g. Dusseldorp Forum, *Place Based Resilience: Community Driven Response and Recovery in a Time of Covid-19,* July, 2020.

16   Erik Hans Klijn and Joop Koppenjan, "Complexity in Governance Network Theory," *Complexity, Governance & Networks* 1, no. 1 (2014): 64.

17   Susan Goodwin, Mark Riboldi, Lisa Fennis, Elaine Fishwick, and Marc Stears, *All Together: a new future for commissioning human services in NSW* (Sydney Policy Lab, University of Sydney, 2020).

18   Asha Ramzan, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 9, 2020.

19   Ibid.

20   Tessa Boyd-Caine, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 3, 2020.

21   Emma McGarrity and Mark Connelly, interviewed by Mark Riboldi and Lisa Fennis, December 4, 2020.

22   Victorian Ombudsman, *Investigation into the Detention and Treatment of Public Housing Residents Arising from a COVID-19 'Hard Lockdown' in July 2020,* (December 2020).

23   Kim McAlister, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 8, 2020.

24   Paul Cairney, "Complexity Theory in Political Science and Public Policy," *Political Studies Review* 10, no. 3 (2012): 354.

25   *Human Learning Systems – Public Service for the Real World* (ThemPra Social Pedagogy United Kingdom, June 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.

26   Peak bodies are Australian non-government organisations – also referred to as associations or federations – that represent, advocate and provide support for their members, such as an aligned sector of smaller organisations or a particular group of individuals united around a particular issue.

27   Systems and Networks focus group, facilitated by The Sydney Policy Lab, November 23, 2020.

28   Violet Roumeliotis, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 10, 2021.

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38   Systems and Networks review focus group, facilitated by The Sydney Policy Lab, August 5,

39   2021.

39   Kim McAlister, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 8, 2020.

40   Ibid.

41   Asha Ramzan, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 9, 2020.

42   Jess Scully, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, January 25, 2021.

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46   Martin Stewart Weeks, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 12, 2021.

47   Asha Ramzan, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 9, 2020.

48   Systems and Networks focus group, facilitated by The Sydney Policy Lab, November 23, 2020.

49   Ibid.

50   Michele Goldman, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 2, 2021.

51   Violet Roumeliotis, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 10, 2021.

52   Community Connection focus group, facilitated by The Sydney Policy Lab, December 2, 2020.

53   Laura Barnes, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 11, 2021.

54   Stephen M. R. Covey with Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust.* (Simon and Schuster, 2007).

55   Michele Goldman, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 2, 2021.

56   Kim McAlister, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 8, 2020.

57   Cella Green, Gemma Carey & Helen Dickinson, "Barriers and enablers in the development of a COVID-19 policy response for people with disability in Australia," *Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health,* (June 2021), 4.

58   Systems and Networks focus group, facilitated by The Sydney Policy Lab, November 23, 2020.

59   Ibid.

60   Tessa Boyd-Caine, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, December 3, 2020.

61   Jess Scully, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, January 25, 2021.

62   Tattersall, *Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change*, 11.

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68   Bassina Farbenblum, interviewed by Mark Riboldi, February 18, 2020.

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79   Systems and Network focus group, facilitated by The Sydney Policy Lab, November 23, 2020.

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 Sathiananathan, 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