

# Civil Society Capability - Community Connection



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**July 2022**



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 – community connection.**

It identifies barriers, enablers and opportunities to developing community connection 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.



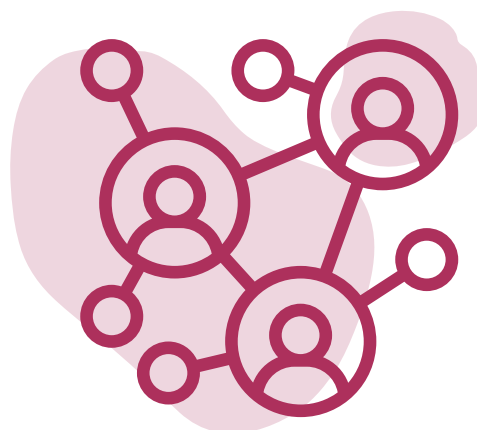
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## ADVOCACY AND INFLUENCE



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 2: Community Connection

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

## Introduction

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

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

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

 ***One of the most important parts of community development is how you connect with isolated people and engage the most disengaged. It is always easier to connect with people who are involved in community dialogue, but how do you give a voice to the voiceless? How do you empower people to actually speak up and express their views and have input in funding and policy decisions? It's about creating space for these people to have conversations where you can hear new ideas of what could work.***  
**Can Yasmut,**  
**Local Community Services Association<sup>1</sup>**

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



with disability, women and young people. They recommended that “re-establishing Australia’s social connectedness will be a vital element of a public policy response in the next stage of the pandemic.”<sup>3</sup>

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

In Australia, ANU economics professor Andrew Leigh in 2010 made similar observations to Putnam about a noted decline of people’s voluntary engagement with clubs, associations and

organisations.<sup>7</sup> Decades earlier, noted Australian feminist Eva Cox in her 1995 Bower Lectures, *A Truly Civil Society*, warned that the obsession with measuring only economic indicators, and thus ignoring “quality of life and life satisfaction indicators,” meant that a suite of social problems were going unaddressed and would only get worse.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Australian governments and civil society organisations have begun exploring ways to more effectively engage with communities. At a grassroots level, frameworks such as collective impact and community-led justice reinvestment have begun to be used to align government, philanthropic and service sector resources around community-led agendas for change.<sup>9</sup> In 2020, Andrew Leigh, now a Member of Parliament representing the ACT, followed up his 2010 *Disconnected with Reconnected – a Community Builder’s Handbook*, which gathers stories of successful community-led organisations and initiatives.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, City of Sydney Councillor Jess Scully released *Glimpses of Utopia: Real Ideas for a Fairer World*, which similarly collects stories of hope from around the world to address the challenges “that climate change presents” and “the inequality that’s tearing us apart.”<sup>11</sup>

Government and non-government organisations alike have a vested interest in making far stronger connections with the communities they represent

and serve. Even in a country like Australia, which experienced comparatively few COVID-19 cases and deaths in 2020, the pandemic shone a harsh light onto just how strong our connection across communities really is. In conversations with hundreds of civil society leaders across Australia and the world, Strengthening Aus Civil Society researchers heard stories of systems failing during the pandemic, with people and communities falling through the cracks.

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

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


A common theme running through these principles is that civil society is strongest when it is firmly oriented towards community. This requires civil society leaders and organisations to

engage in a continual process of re-energising, re-authorisation and re-connection with the people they claim to represent, fight for, and serve. The ongoing renewal and strengthening of these relationships is potentially the only way to resist the dazzling allure of corporate and political power.

## What Limits Community Connection?

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

Through our research, the Strengthening Aus Civil Society research team has identified three key forces which are perceived to create problems and hold them in place when it comes to community connection.

 ***I think the strengths of relationships can carry you or sink you. By and large, the services that we work with, the services that are already positioning themselves around the needs of their communities, are likely to be services that have managed for themselves greater flexibility in their funding, greater capability and capacity to shift as needs emerge. They are likely to identify those changing needs and be really onto possible solutions, well ahead of the structures they're part of.***  
**Tessa Boyd-Caine, Health Justice Australia<sup>12</sup>**

## The Charity Model

The first constraint on community connection to emerge from our research is that a traditional idea of *charity* and service delivery still permeates many formal approaches to community well-being. British social entrepreneur Hilary Cottam





identifies that a traditional charity approach positions people's challenges as problems to be fixed, usually by someone else.<sup>13</sup> One of the many problems with this approach is its underlying premise that it is appropriate for people with power and resources to decide what is best for those without. In Australia this echoes back to a time during which many religious charities played a role in the colonisation of Australia, including forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families, brought most demonstrably to public attention in the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Bringing them Home* National Inquiry.<sup>14</sup> At the very least, a charitable approach undermines a key principle of democratic societies: the idea that everyone should be treated with equal respect.

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

**Magnus Linder, Anglicare<sup>15</sup>**

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

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

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

Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers heard illustrative stories of people without food during COVID-19 not going to charities like St Vincent de Paul to ask for help, but they would accept a food basket from someone they knew – for example from the parents and teachers’ association at their children’s school.<sup>24</sup> Rosanna Barbero from Addison Road Community Centre noted how the Australian Red Cross, funded to provide support to newly unemployed and struggling international students, initially put in place an application process so complicated and onerous that people



were discouraged from even applying. By engaging with community-based organisations like Addison Road, which established a no-questions-asked food distribution centre that fed thousands of people each week at the height of the pandemic, Red Cross was eventually able to better reach people in need.<sup>25</sup>

## Transactional Cultures

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

**One of the elephants in the room is how undemocratic some corporate civil society organisations are. We have CEOs sitting on whacking big salaries and real inequality in those organisations. I think this is worth talking about, and asking whether democratising civil society organisations is a priority.**  
**Susan Goodwin, Professor of Policy Studies, University of Sydney<sup>27</sup>**





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

The concepts of *bridging relationships* and *relationships springing out of place* can come together through practices such as “collective impact”, currently explored in various community-led initiatives across Australia. As Glyn Davis notes, collective impact “assumes (that) coordinated work among government and for-purpose organisations towards a shared goal has a better

chance of success than isolated pursuit by a single government agency or mission-driven charity.”<sup>30</sup> Collective impact brings collaborators together around a common agenda through a focal point of a backbone support organisation. Relationships are developed and maintained through attention to shared learning and evaluation, “continual communication” and “mutually reinforcing activities.”<sup>31</sup> This kind of model and practice, Davis notes “jostles uncomfortably” with more conventionally charity or government-based practice,<sup>32</sup> and potentially signifies the ongoing shift towards what UK-based think tank New Local calls the era of the “community paradigm”.<sup>33</sup>

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

 ***One of the ways we interact with our members and continue to build membership has been, until COVID hit, regularly holding community dinners where new members could come and meet and see what we do, and people brought food. The act of making food, bringing food and sharing food is a very strong way to build a sense of community.***  
**Colin Long, Hope Cooperative<sup>36</sup>**

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

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

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

### **INSIGHT: Health Justice Australia<sup>40</sup>**

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

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

## **The Erosion of Trust**


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

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

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

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

In a focus group, NSW Council of Social Services (NCOSS) CEO Joanna Quilty described how this disconnection amongst citizens extends can extend into broader civil society:

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

**Joanna Quilty, NCOSS<sup>44</sup>**

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


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



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

## Strategies for Reconnecting with Communities

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

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

**Ashlee Wone,**  
*First Peoples Disability Network*<sup>49</sup>

### Valuing Lived Experience

The idea of privileging the perspectives of *people with lived experience* has become increasingly vogue across the spheres of advocacy and policy development in recent years. A related critical refrain, particularly from the disability and First Nations communities is *nothing about us without*

*us*.<sup>50</sup> While this is a clear acknowledgement of a desire to engage better with people and communities, civil society can be just as guilty of engaging in token consultation as corporations or government departments. An important question, therefore, is: how can civil society leaders genuinely embed diversity of experiences and voices within their organisations?

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

 *For us, the cooperative model makes sure that there's no difference between community and the organisation because the organisation is the community. The rules of the cooperative are set up to give voice and power to members of the cooperative.*  
**Colin Long, Hope Cooperative**<sup>53</sup>

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



as spokespeople on issues related to poverty and economic inequity.<sup>55</sup>

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

Engaging more closely with communities of interest can be a process that evolves over time as organisations change, and it is not without work to do."<sup>58</sup>

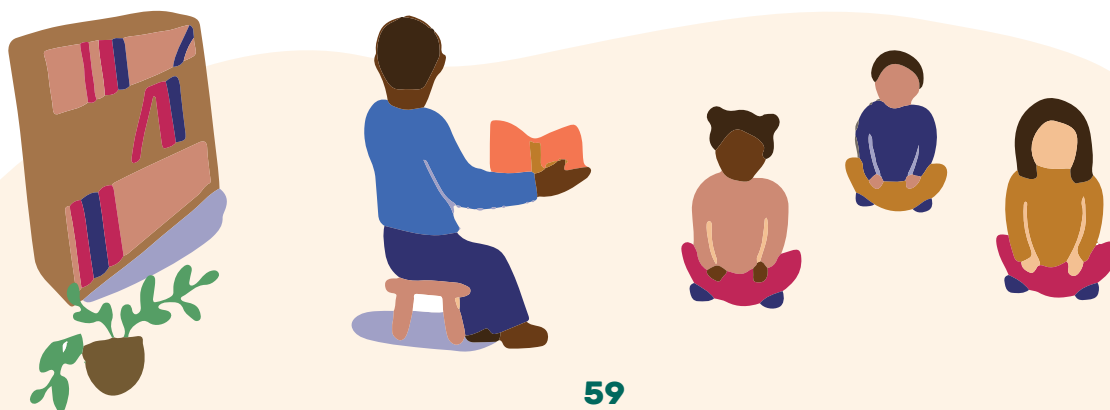
challenges. Similar to the experience of Asthma Australia profiled below, ACON Health is an organisation that has had to change with the times. Beginning in 1985 in NSW at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, ACON was originally "an AIDS organisation largely focused on the needs of gay men."<sup>57</sup>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

### INSIGHT: Asthma Australia<sup>59</sup>

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

A starting point three years ago was setting up a Consumer Advisory Council containing a diverse range of people who experience asthma, to better understand the effects of asthma for different communities. During the 2019-20 bushfires, over 12,000 people responded to an Asthma Australia survey and shared their experiences. During the pandemic, the organisation surveyed more than 1000 people with asthma, who agreed to undertake surveys as part of a regular panel, to understand how the pandemic was affecting them specifically. These insights have been strengthened by the organisation's *Asthma Champions* program – 150 people with asthma who can share their stories in the media and meet with politicians.

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



## Supporting Community Leadership

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

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

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

**Thuy Linh Nguyen, Sydney Alliance<sup>63</sup>**

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

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

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

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

## INSIGHT: Brotherhood of St Laurence<sup>71</sup>


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

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

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

## Flexibility and Adaptation

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

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

**Michele Goldman, Asthma Australia<sup>74</sup>**

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

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

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



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

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

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

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







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

and allowed more flexible delivery and acquittal of funding relating to services such as homelessness, domestic violence and child protection.<sup>83</sup>

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

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

# Principles for Strengthening Community Connection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# I Conclusion and Recommendations

**T**he 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.



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# About Strengthening Australian Civil Society

**S**trengthening 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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