

Civil Society Capability: COVID-19 Stories





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 reflections and learnings from a wide range of civil society organisations and practitioners arising from: the response to COVID-19 from Australia's First Nations; the Melbourne Towers COVID-19 lockdowns; the experience of food insecurity in many local areas; and non-citizens living in Australia during the pandemic.

Other summary reports in this series highlight the key capability areas essential for those working to build and support strong and resilient communities: leadership, community connection, systems and networks, advocacy and influence. Recommendations for those interested in strengthening civil society capability are identified.

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

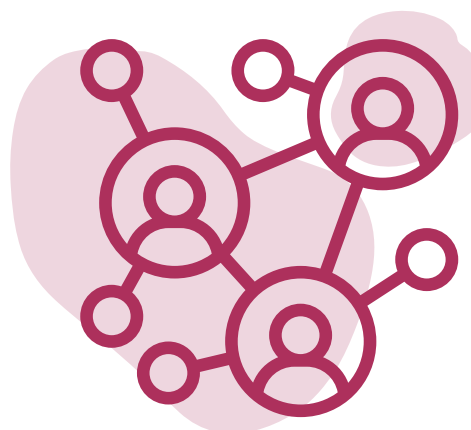


ADVOCACY AND INFLUENCE



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.





Responses to COVID-19 from Australia's First Nations

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pat Turner, NACCHO⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





The Melbourne Towers COVID-19 lockdown

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Food Security and COVID-19

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

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

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

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

Small business owners roll up their sleeves

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

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

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

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

A community-powered food relief hub

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

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

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

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

State-wide logistics across broad networks

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

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

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



Non-citizens and COVID-19

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



I Conclusion and Recommendations

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

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

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

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

In addition, to these specific suggestions, we wish also to set out a final series of overall recommendations that we hope those who work in and care for Australian civil society will consider in the year ahead. They are laid out below:

Implications for civil society organisations

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

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

Implications for legislators and policy makers

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

Implications for philanthropists and other funders

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

Notes

Australia's First Nations Responses to COVID-19

- 1 Rachel Pannett, "Australia made a plan to protect Indigenous elders from covid-19. It worked." *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2021.
- 2 James Ward and Jason Agostino, "Coronavirus will devastate Aboriginal communities if we don't act now." *The Conversation*, March 19, 2020.
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About Strengthening Australian Civil Society

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

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

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

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

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