Supporting people and communities in need: Australian civil society's response to COVID-19

Interim findings from a Sydney Policy Lab project, in partnership with the Paul Ramsay Foundation

Since July 2020 the Sydney Policy Lab has held in-depth conversations with civil society leaders from across the country in a bid to understand how charitable and other civil society organisations have responded to the challenges of the pandemic.

> *This conversation comes at a time of massive disruption that provides a rare opportunity for genuine systemic transformation on a global scale.*
>
> **Jason Glanville**, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute

By exploring civil society experiences and responses to COVID-19 in Australia, the Lab's research has surfaced urgent and important insights.

Guided by Civil Society Leaders

As part of the research, the Sydney Policy Lab has engaged with hundreds of civil society leaders around Australia – passionate community members and people with experience working with non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations. These conversations have been designed around creating spaces and opportunities for personal reflection and forming new connections across difference, in line with the Sydney Policy Lab's relational approach to research and policy development.

Guided by the broad expertise of the project's Advisory Panel, initial insights came from a series of in-depth relational interviews and workshops between July 2020 and February 2021, leading to the creation of review papers in each of the capability areas: leadership, community connection, systems and networks, and advocacy and influence.

At a two-day online meeting in early August 2021, 29 civil society leaders scrutinised the Lab's interim findings in a *Review of Reviews*. Participants responded to provocations drawn from factors which civil society leaders felt either supported or got in the way of their efforts to serve and represent community need.

The Review of Reviews has led to this communique – an initial statement of principles around civil society capability. We hope these principles will guide the next phase of the Lab's work to support and strengthen Australian civil society.

Everyone that Lab researchers spoke to were united in their belief that a strong civil society is one that is closely oriented towards the needs of the people and communities who most need support.

The ongoing mission of the Lab's work in this area is to continue creating spaces and convening conversations for civil society leaders to connect to their purpose, reflect on their experiences and forge new ideas and coalitions for change.

Nurturing Links Across Civil Society

The links civil society can weave through collective and collaborative action are its greatest strength. This includes creating strong and enduring connections with:

- The people and communities directly connected with and impacted by systemic disadvantage, through a strengths-based model that puts community members at the heart of decision-making around the challenges they face.
- People and organisations across, government, civil society and beyond who are interested in achieving the same outcomes, through taking the time to build relationships around common goals, share resources and decision-making, as well as generate informed strategies for change.

There are instances, however, when the relationships that civil society organisations have with funders and decision-makers can frustrate the desire to work strategically and collaboratively. For example, unhealthy power imbalances in relationships with governments and other funders can make people reluctant to speak up and take risks, push organisations into certain activities against their better judgement, and create an environment which silences debate and leaves little room for collective learning and reflection.

Principles for Strengthening Civil Society Capability

Civil society leaders engaging with the research displayed a strong appetite to nurture their links with people, communities, and each other, and to work collectively to challenge unhealthy conditions beyond their control. Important principles emerged in each of the four capability areas explored in the research, all seen as potentially contributing to stronger and more effective links across civil society.

Capability Area 1: Leadership

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

Capability Area 2: Community Connection

- 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.
- 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 in the sector in the past.
- Organisational structure can impact connection to community. Well-designed organisations can bridge the gap by ensuring diversity of experience across leadership and decision-making roles.

Capability Area 3: Systems and Networks

- Civil society is stronger when people, communities and organisations work in collaboration. The challenges facing people and communities often originate within complex systems governed at a distance. No single community, organisation, or even sector can shift these systems alone.
- People and organisations can perform different roles within networks. This includes the need to: create and hold spaces for collaboration and learning; bring people from varying backgrounds into contact with each other; and encourage participants towards action around shared goals.
- Effective collaboration requires resourcing. Successfully sharing experiences and creating collective agendas for action takes time, money and people. Funders, both from government and philanthropy, would be well-advised to make these investments.

Capability Area 4: Advocacy and Influence

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

Next Steps

The economic, social and health impacts of COVID-19 are just the most recent crises challenging communities across the world. Australian civil society will continue to be called upon to support those in need, from emergency support that meets day-to-day needs, to taking on entrenched power and shifting systems for the common good.

> *Civil society organisations are absolutely critical. If they weren't operating and didn't exist, whether voluntary or not, with the expertise and the reach, we would be a far less cohesive and safe country.*

> **Violet Roumeliotis,** CEO, Settlement Services International

Through the Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative, the Sydney Policy Lab will continue to convene conversations and generate knowledge to support the practice of civil society leaders from all walks of life. In the near future, the initiative will: release a detailed public report expanding on the themes and ideas within this short paper; develop these hypotheses through deep engagement with communities and organisations across the country; stimulate public debate around the role of civil society; and convene diverse coalitions around potential avenues for change which participants have identified.

More Information

Strengthening Australian Civil Society is an ongoing collaborative research project that takes its lead from the civil society practitioners involved. The Lab actively welcomes contributions, critiques and potential collaborations from across civil society and beyond. To connect, visit **www.strongercivilsociety.org.**