

# Enhancing Community Development In Neighbourhood Centres

2021 REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





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### **Abstract**

This report documents 10 Conversations between Neighbourhood and Community Centres about community development. The initiative came from questions raised by Centres at the 2019 State CD Qld Community Development Conference.

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### **Acknowledgement**

In the spirit of connection to place, connection to people and shared wisdom, we would like to respectfully acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Queensland communities. We acknowledge elders past, present and future. We acknowledge First Nations' unbroken custodianship of these lands and waters and value their wisdom and expertise of community and group processes.



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## Key Highlights

### **Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres have incorporated unique Community Development Traditions throughout their history.**

Growing across the state from the 1970's, Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres have a long association with Queensland's Community Development movement. This close relationship continues today through the Queensland Community Development Conference and the close relationship between QFCA, neighbourhood and community centres and Community Development Queensland.

### **Community Development in Neighbourhood Centres has been impacted by political forces, changing funding environments, and increasing demand for individual crisis work.**

Policy and funding changes have significantly impacted Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres. The increased focus on service delivery to individuals experiencing crisis is another factor contributing to a decreased focus on Community Development work.

### **Neighbourhood Centre staff and volunteers need further Community Development education, training, mentoring and peer support.**

Neighbourhood Centre staff from across the state have noted that a constraining factor for re-invigorating Community Development in the sector is the availability of education, training, supervision and peer mentoring in Community Development. Limited options exist in the state for Community Development qualifications.

### **The Neighbourhood Centre Sector workforce has identified ways to enhance and further Community Development alongside Service Delivery approaches.**

Community Development can be enhanced in Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres by using participatory development methods within the sector, with the support of QFCA and the NCC member network. Three focus areas have been identified. These are; (1) Embedding Community Development in organisational structures; (2) increased opportunities for CD education, training and mentoring; and (3) Community Development in crisis interventions. First Nations also play an important role in the state's Community Development and Neighbourhood Centre Movement. Enhancing Community Development practice in NCCs is a core component of supporting effective place-based work in Queensland.



# Executive Summary

## Background

What is Community Development (CD)? Are Queensland Neighbourhood Centres really doing it? Has it been lost? Is it still relevant today? If we wanted to strengthen this practice what kinds of support are available?

These are the questions that a gathering of 40 Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) raised at the Queensland Community Development Conference in 2019. Neighbourhood Centres do so much community-oriented work – yet this was a heartfelt question, so what did they mean?



Image: Queensland Community Development Conference 2019, Toowoomba

The NCCs requested Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) to assist a sector wide conversation through which they could examine these questions. This flowed on from QFCA's 2019-22 strategic plan. Two relevant pillars of this plan include (1) highlighting the citizen-led, place based community development work of Neighbourhood and Community Centres, and (2) encouraging active leadership across Queensland NCCs, through creating opportunities for forums and training. One outcome of this strategy was that QFCA obtained funding from the Queensland Government to subsidise the attendance of NCCs at the Queensland Community Development conference.

In response to the subsequent gathering and request of NCCs at the conference, QFCA established a Community Development Sub-Committee which provided NCCs with authority



to act in QFCA's name with accountability to QFCA Board. That Sub-Committee endorsed a pro bono offer from a group of senior community development practitioners, referred to as the CD Task Group, to engage interested NCC practitioners in conversation. Griffith University offered to document the conversations and provide feedback as a form of participatory research. The CD and Research task groups agreed to provide feedback to the CD Sub-Committee on:

- the conversations, including current practices in CD, those interested in enhancing CD practice, constraints and opportunities (from those who participate in the webinars) and what is required to move forward;
- the benefits, limitations and costs in using technology in participatory engagement processes;
- data to engage with government, other organisations, structures and the wider Neighbourhood Centre sector; and
- the sources drawn on in terms of understandings of community development.

The CD Sub-Committee authorised five webinars as a means of progressing the conversations between Centres. However, it soon became apparent that the conversation could be further elaborated by some additional processes. These included:

- a focus group with some of those NCCs who initially raised the issues;
- a mapping project to begin assessing the environment and other stakeholders; and
- a high level series of conversations with a small group of NCC managers about their organisational support for CD.

All of these smaller conversations relate to the same project, and they support the investigation into the Centres' initial set of questions, and so are reported in this document.

### **Conversations as Research**

The research component of this project had ethics clearance from Griffith University, Ethics Reference Number 2020/533. Invitation went to all Queensland NCCs, emphasising that participation was entirely voluntary. All participants were informed that the conversations were being recorded and agreed to keep this in mind when speaking. Breakout groups within the sessions were not electronically recorded.

The research method draws on a tradition which sees conversation as a form of inquiry. It is particularly relevant where the question has come from research participants, and the conversation is a collaborative attempt to draw on their knowledge and experience in a meaning making process (Quinn Patton, 2009, Feldman, 1999 <sup>1</sup>). Community development, like action research is a democratic activity that locates agency with the people who experience the issue or are asking the question.

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<sup>1</sup> Patton, M. Q. (2009). Developmental evaluation compared with r&d. [Web Video]. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=M81Xp9eRhv0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=M81Xp9eRhv0)

Feldman, A. (1999) The Role of Conversation in Collaborative Action Research, *Education Action Research* 7:1 125-147 publ online 2006 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09650799900200076>



The combination of conversation and research in this project offered a unique opportunity for participants to bring their everyday practice experience into dialogue with a specific way of understanding community development. It should be noted here that community development is a familiar concept in the world of Neighbourhood Centres, and many would suggest that what they do is community development. Yet, the question raised at the conference suggested that some Centres think they are missing something, and that perhaps there has been some confusion of terms.

### Concept Clarification

A number of recent reports<sup>2</sup> have documented what NCCs do. Because NCCs report many of their activities using the term community development, for example, responding to community needs, community networking, community events, community needs assessment, there has been a tendency for the term Community Development to become the generic label embracing a range of community-oriented activities. These community-oriented activities that NCCs currently do are the hallmark of a strong Neighbourhood Centre. It is due to this community-oriented approach that NCCs are able to deliver \$4.08 of social value into Queensland communities for every \$1.00 of investment<sup>3</sup>. This is no mean feat, and surely something that should be acknowledged, understood, and shouted from the highest peaks.

To the CD Task Group, however, the term community development refers to a particular method and set of objectives<sup>4</sup> which are citizen or community member led, which change people's experience of themselves and each other as contributing members of the local community, and importantly, in which the focus of change is some aspect of their community, and by extension, the forces acting upon that community. In this report, the method has been emphasised using the terms *Community Development Method*.

The Task Group understood that a very clear conceptualisation of CD would be required in order that NCCs might consider reclaiming or strengthening this dimension of practice alongside their existing Centre-based activities. This is achieved via a focus on a particular method which strings together a range of familiar practice skills, but in a particular sequence to pursue a strategic outcome. The strategic outcome anticipated within a CD method is the empowerment of community members to affect change locally as engaged citizens in a democracy. Community members are supported and enabled to act with each other on issues they and others experience. They gain skills and knowledge to progress changes which are of benefit to the community or a section of the community and are consistent with a social justice framework. Implicit here is that societies have a built-in tendency to privilege the demands and interests of the most powerful, articulate groups and when the majority of community members are passive in the face of this, the polarity in wealth, power and voice becomes exaggerated.

This is consistent with NCC commitment to social justice and inclusion. However, Centres straddle government and its interests and the interests of community members in their day to day lives. They are both a government funded agency and a people's organisation. Some traditions of community development exploit the conflict inherent here, but the CD method explored in this report construes these different interests as opportunity for dialogue and

<sup>2</sup> ANHCA (2011) *Strengthening Local Communities*; QCOSS & QFCA (2017) *Neighbourhood Centre Consultation for the IMS Strategy*; Policy Innovation Hub (2019) *Neighbourhood and Community Centres: Strengthening Good Practice in Qld: Parts 1 and 2*. Griffith University.

<sup>3</sup> QFCA (2020) *Neighbourhood Centre Survey Results 2020*.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Kelly & Peter Westoby named their 2018 book *Participatory Development Practice*, instead of community development practice to overcome this same problem.



negotiated change between citizens and between citizens, their government, or other entity impacting on community life. The pertinent point being that it is citizens, not Neighbourhood Centres, which are identifying, forming relationships around, and acting upon, the issues.

If a Centre is not only hearing the issues in community, but responding with a program that addresses the issues, this is locally responsive service delivery. This is a strength of NCCs but typically, it does not meet the requirement that people of the community own and address the issues. If a Centre is hearing the issues from people within and outside the Centre, and supporting people to come together to address the issues that they are most concerned about, then this meets the requirements of (i) people led change, and (ii) on issues of importance to them in their local community, and (iii) given that most issues in community are intricately linked to broader societal issues, it is likely that any change will bring benefit to a wider group of people. A trend across the human service sector has been to recruit community members as volunteers to deliver activities designed by the Centre. This shifts the role from citizens to volunteers, and it is not the same as citizens acting together to address their own concerns. People's agency as citizens and community members is central to this community development method.

The personal empowerment that happens in NCCs is a valuable step that can contribute to future community development action for change. The groups that operate within NCCs provide valuable experience in working as a group. Similarly, building a sense of community within a Neighbourhood Centre, can be a steppingstone towards people engaging beyond the Centre in dialogue and action towards broader community participation. These things, occurring within NCCs provide fertile ground for moving forward the issues that people are raising. It is often the case that in a trusting environment, people raise personal issues that have public implications, but they are not picked up because the practice method of hearing this and moving it forward as a public issue is not understood. In such cases an opportunity for enabling the community is missed, and an opportunity for progressing change on a difficult public issue is missed.

The QFCA Community Development Sub-Committee raised a pertinent question about the sources of Community Development drawn on in the webinars. This question can be approached via reference to traditions. There are several traditions of community development, for example:

- the nonviolent tradition with its roots in Gandhi's teachings,
- the community organising tradition which emerged from the work of Saul Alinsky,
- the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach introduced in the early 1990s by John McKnight and John Kretzmann,
- the critical community education approach associated with the work of Paulo Freire,
- the Settlement House movement initiated by Jane Addams,
- feminist organising, social action and empowerment of women,
- LGBTQ organising,
- the L'Arche Communities established by Jean Vanier, and
- the approach that informed this project, which is sometimes called the participatory development approach, and known locally as the Queensland tradition.

All these traditions are alive in some form in Australia. All draw on philosophical roots, practice experience and practice-based theorising, so as to pursue effective action for change. Each one of them requires a rigour of practice and study. There is some cross fertilisation between them in the contemporary environment, however, each retains its logic as a discrete practice. Whilst all are worthy, this short project can only do justice to one. The CD Task Group chose the Queensland Participatory Development approach because it has a clear methodology that can be learned, practised and reflected on. It has a history of



success in this State. It has been taught in several Queensland universities, and has existing infrastructure and local trainers. Above all, it is suitable as an NCC method of practice, because it is nonconflictual, relationship based, and builds group strength across a local community overtime, making for strong community ties between groups and a mature capacity for local problem solving and development. It is a method that can become a practice, be shared, be reflected on, and added to as we learn.

Many forces have contributed to the constraints on CD as a professional and citizen practice. Community development method was a natural choice of practice approach when the first NCCs opened in Queensland in the 1970s. Most employed a CD worker who supported and enabled groups of community members to take up issues that they saw needed to be addressed in their communities, and often beyond. They focused especially on issues which were impacting the most disadvantaged members of the community – those most affected by regular flooding; those most affected by housing or job shortages; those most disadvantaged by each change of local planning or social and economic policy. They engaged with low income families wanting to access affordable food and housing and families looking for parenting support and child care. This work sometimes led to new services, and sometimes to local social change, but always the people involved gained new skills and relationships through their collective public efforts. From a social justice perspective, they supported communities to speak up for change at the structural level. NCCs were community managed, the processes were community led, and the outcomes were not only resolutions of some pressing issues, but increasing numbers of community-minded local people with the skills and commitment to work together for the benefit of the wider community.

Overtime as levels of crisis in local communities grew, and as funding became more tightly structured and targeted to specific services, Centres became increasingly involved in delivering services to individuals. Their staffing profile, Board profile and Management structure began to change. Many Centres have worked hard to retain their commitment to creating a sense of belonging for various groups within the Centre itself, devising new programs so the Centre can meet community needs and advocating for individuals experiencing injustice. Yet, increasingly, it is Centres, not communities who set the agendas, run the projects, deliver the services and do the advocacy.

Of particular note when considering constraints in the Queensland context was the period between 2012 and 2013. Queensland's community services sector was impacted by austerity measures implemented by the Newman Government after the Global Financial Crisis. Neighbourhood Centres were immediately impacted by having funding reduced by 10% and actively encouraged to pursue corporatised service delivery approaches to ensure financial sustainability. Reporting to funding bodies began to heavily emphasise "counting heads" with a focus on obtaining clear economic outcomes for individuals. The Carmody Report also recommended diverting a large amount of Child Safety and Family Support activity away from Government to the community sector. As these events occurred, on a national level the human services sector faced industrial turmoil as the result of the Equal Remuneration Order handed down by the Fair Work Commission.

Non-constitutional corporations (a term used in relation to the Federal Government's *Workplace Relations Act*) in Queensland were especially impacted by extra remuneration for employees due to other pay equity regulations in March and December 2012. This 'perfect storm' of events throughout 2012 and 2013 changed the fundamental nature of many Neighbourhood Centres across Queensland. It led to staff losses and a search for funding opportunities to maintain viability. Centres began delivering services of all kinds, more corporatised approaches were adopted and some Centres amalgamated into larger non-profit companies limited by guarantee. The architecture of the Neighbourhood Centre



sector across Queensland was changing in response to policy impacts. It is observed that services such as counselling and family support, now prominent in many of Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres, are a unique feature in Queensland, in comparison to Neighbourhood Houses in other states, which rarely offer case management style service delivery.

Facing the constraints and turning the situation around requires a concerted effort, best approached as a sector. The Neighbourhood Centre voice now has new opportunities to be heard, and NCCs are seeking information to inform their collective future. Throughout the webinar conversations it was important to provide insight into one CD methodology so that any decision to act has a base of understanding.

### **The Motivating Force**

Why pay attention to community development and why now? For many Centres, the answer is a nagging feeling that something has been lost. At the Queensland Community Development Conference, NCC delegates caught a glimpse of what that something might be. Fortunately, NCCs have the support of QFCA and were able to use that moment as a doorway to further exploration.

Neighbourhood Centres are very connected within their communities; they respond to a huge diversity of needs, they offer a sense of belonging to people who are feeling alone and disempowered, but they see a growing world of pain and need beyond the Centre. Individual need has reached crisis proportions and servicing this need individual by individual is overwhelming the staffing and resources of Centres.

It is not just that the mode of, or funding for, service delivery is inadequate to the need, although most would say that it is, but also a range of policies, laws, institutions and attitudes in the broader society are exacerbating inequality, making it hard for communities to find common ground and posing a serious threat to the common good at local, state and national levels. Centres make a significant contribution to social cohesion, yet new generations are falling into poverty. The social justice commitment of Centres puts them into agreement with other authorities, for example, UNDP (2019), which says "Rising inequality is not a natural or inevitable condition. This means we can do something to change it!" (UNDP 2019)<sup>5</sup>. Working with their communities to go beyond alleviating immediate issues, so as to address broader structural issues, is something which resonates strongly with the social justice mission of Neighbourhood Centres, but which has fallen from common practice.

### **The Conversations**

Between April and November 2020 ten conversations were hosted which brought together NCC personnel in a variety of ways. These included:

- Five webinar sessions for NCC personnel
- Three experimental learning sessions for Managers
- One Mapping session to examine who else might be experiencing or addressing similar issues, and
- One Focus Group, which reported to the group which originally raised the issue.

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<sup>5</sup> UNDP (2019). Addressing the Root Causes of Inequality.

<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2019/addressing-the-root-causes-of-inequality.html>



## THE WEBINARS

Queensland NCCs. Between 14 and 46 attended each session, and an unknown number watched the series of webinars online. Reasons for signing up for this project varied according to participants' experience of community development. Some wanted to understand what this practice is about, and consider its relevance, some thought they knew what it is about and thought maybe they are doing it, some wanted to know what each other is doing, and for some, who have studied and practiced over time, it is an important practice approach for NCCs and they want to encourage and support it as such. See Report Appendix 1 for further webinar content as recordings and resources.



Image: Webinar 1

**Webinar 1** introduced a clear description of community development, and a story to illustrate it. This story, of community members successfully addressing an issue that they themselves articulated, can be viewed in the webinar video. The conversations following this input strongly affirmed the importance of this practice to the mission of NCCs. Most people identified that to their knowledge few NCCs are doing it – so, yes it is lost. From this very first conversation, participants began articulating the barriers in the present context which inhibit this practice:

### Constraining Forces

- The funding regime does not support it;
- Managers and Boards do not understand it;
- We do not have the skills, knowledge or experience;
- There is limited education, training, mentoring, supervision available for this practice;
- The expectations around service delivery are very strong, both internally and externally;

<sup>6</sup> The webinars can be viewed at <https://www.qfca.org.au/community-development-subcommittee>



- An established way of doing things operates within busy Centres, and people are reluctant to change;
- We are overwhelmed with the level of crisis, and vulnerable people need quick responses.

A poll following discussion in Webinar 1 asked: *Are NCCs an important part of local infrastructure which provides support for local people to gather and address issues of importance to them?*

Yes	They should be but often are not	No, this is not their role	Don't know
26	21	0	2
63%	51%	0	5%

Table 1: NCCs and CD

In **Webinar 2**, NCC practitioners provided an account of their recent efforts to turn around a project which had been a NCC initiative, led by NCC workers, to a community member owned project. Their account confirmed that there are barriers and they and participants discussed their processes of working around those barriers. NCC participants recognised that a CD approach is possible, and they teased out the elements of this story that made a difference:

Supportive Forces

- The manager supported it;
- The organisation encouraged creativity and cooperation;
- Two workers as a team supported each other to work rigorously with a method of CD practice;
- A mentor supported the work, assisting to pull out reflections on method, theory and practice implications;
- The community group were keen to tell their story and act on it, they were ready for the turnaround;
- Once a decision had been taken to change the practice, support and amplification came from unexpected places.

This celebratory story encouraged conversation and inspired hope.

**Webinar 3** provided further resources in enabling community members to “own and progress” action on issues of importance to them. In this webinar a video by an external trainer, leading a workshop with NCCs in Tasmania, enabled Queensland NCCs to see that NCCs elsewhere are encountering and unpacking the relevance of similar CD material. This workshop video confirmed that CD is best thought of as a citizen practice, supported as required by professional staff. A second part of Webinar 3 included a story of a beginning practitioner who was coached to shift from a helper into a mode of deep, alongside listening. In this webinar, participants spoke enthusiastically about the importance of CD to NCCs. They identified with the issues discussed and were reminded of the value of sharing about practice, as a means of continuous practice development.

**Webinar 4** moved the focus to the importance of structures in holding and maintaining a CD discussed in their Neighbourhood Centres. This is a first step to moving the issues forward, both horizontally between Centres and vertically into QFCA and beyond.

In **Webinar 5**, the discussions of the previous webinars blossomed into a fully articulated desire to take action together to enable those Neighbourhood Centres and staff that wanted to



more fully action a CD approach. Four participants volunteered to each carry forward one of the challenges and invite other NCCs into discussion and action. The four issues to be carried forward are: CD and individual crisis; CD training; a whole of organisation framework to support CD; peer support and mentoring of CD across NCCs. These groups will meet in 2021 and will consider how to use a CD approach in addressing such issues together. QFCA offered to promote and support this work.

The journey from Webinar 1 to Webinar 5 was certainly, for some people, a journey from fuzzy understanding to clarity of what a CD Method entails. They gained a shared recognition of its value to local communities, and expressed regret that the skill base is largely, but not completely, lost from the sector. Participants confirmed that this is a relevant practice for NCCs and for today's context. Participants could see that there is a detailed framework for practice, that has emerged from trial and error over many years, which needs to be learned and practiced with supportive oversight. As one practitioner said, "what if my community group wants to take action on something which upsets our funding body?" The method presented through the webinars is democratic, dialogical and powerful yet gentle enough to hold relationships through difference. Affected stakeholders are brought into the dialogue, issues are discussed and solutions negotiated, relationships are valued and maintained into the future. The method facilitates a shift in power dynamics, so that communities themselves can have access to the information, resources, decisions, and relationships that they need if they are to become active in the public domain. This cannot be achieved without organisational support each step of the way, even though the actual project, is and remains, a project of the community group, not a corporate project. There are many nuances in the method, which are critical to steering a path forward, and maintaining the relationships even where disagreement exists, participants recognised that both their NCC, themselves as staff, and their local community members have much to learn about the approach.

When teaching or learning the method, it can be helpful to see that there are two distinct movements: Ordering and Structuring. Ordering focuses on the building of relationships at the local level, the sharing of stories around issues of concern, the building of a sense of ownership as the action is carried into the public world. Structuring acknowledges that the public world is made up of organisations, governments and commercial structures. Working out which structures to engage with and how, in seeking and securing change requires a set of skills and knowledge which rarely come naturally to citizens, yet can be learned and harnessed for local purposes.

Disclaimer: Throughout the webinar conversations, participants appeared to accept this understanding of community development. It may be that some participants dropped out rather than propose alternative understandings or argue about the definition. A survey was sent to all who registered for the webinars to seek feedback on the form of community development that was proposed and the processes of unpacking it. Only two people responded who affirmed both the CD approach and the process.

## LINKING UP THE CONVERSATIONS

As early as Webinar 1, participants were saying that in order to practice CD method, they needed more support from their manager. Managers who were part of the webinars, agreed that, although they supported community development in theory, they were unsure how better to support it in practice. Another constraint identified by participants was the difficulty of accessing community development training, supervision and mentoring. The CD Sub-Committee decided that a few additional conversations, that respond to the issues arising, could parallel the webinars, rather than wait until the webinars finished. They hosted a "Mapping Session" with a view to identifying other stakeholders who have an interest in progressing CD method, particularly in the CD and CD training systems. This section reports



on those additional conversations, as well as a conversation in which the Sub-Committee reported back to a focus group of those who had raised the initial issues at the conference. These additional conversations provided further stepping stones towards enabling NCCs to strengthen their CD focus, and each needs to be built on with further activity beyond the 2020 webinar project.

In summary there were:

- Five webinar discussions;
- Three experimental education sessions with managers delivered by Anthony Kelly;
- One mapping session to identify other stakeholders with an interest in CD and CD training;
- One focus group to provide feedback on the project from those who raised the issues at the CD Conference.

In reality, there were multiple other conversations happening within and between Neighbourhood Centres, Neighbourhood Centre staff, managers, QFCA and its CD Sub-Committee, and beyond, which were not available to the research, but which were creating interest and momentum.

### **Managers in Conversation**

At the request of NCCs, and with a mandate from QFCA, endorsed by the Director General of Communities, Anthony Kelly<sup>7</sup> facilitated an experimental educational conversation for a group of 6 managers of NCCs who have a commitment to enhancing the capacity of their organisation to carry a participatory development program and create an environment for both services and community development work to flourish.

The project was delivered over 3 Zoom sessions, approximately 2 hours in length held at the times appropriate for the participants. Some pre-reading was required. Managers have a key role in supporting the Board and funding bodies to understand what the organisation is doing and supporting staff in their developmental work with communities. Anthony Kelly invited the managers to consider the steps and stages of these roles, and their purpose at each point along the way.

From a manager's perspective, this is a vital part of any organisation taking on a CD approach, and managers reported that they found it stimulating and saw it as an important part of organisational as well as manager development. The content introduced through these discussions invited managers to think in new ways and consider new possibilities.

In feedback, they said: *"This was excellent"* and *"This was like a masterclass for managers!"*

"I appreciated the practical training approach that Tony took, which is so much more effective than just providing traditional educational content."

Also a very powerful quote by the Manager from a rural NCC:

*"to have my knowledge and skill advancement to where I can articulate my own beliefs and goals better, has opened doors for me and boosts my confidence that i am on a path that is enabling empowerment for others"*

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<sup>7</sup> Anthony Kelly was senior lecturer in community development at University of Queensland for many years. He has been instrumental in articulating the practice approach in a detailed, scholarly and accessible way, and has authored many works on the topic, including co-authoring the recent publication *Participatory Development Practice*, with Dr Peter Westoby.



Some managers reported that as a result of these sessions, they were very successful in engaging their staff and beginning to embed the CD learning in their organisation, whereas others found this difficult. Managers wanted more opportunities to share stories of participatory development in action. Many would like to see an induction and mentoring program for managers.

### Mapping the Environment

The QFCA CD Sub-Committee hosted this conversation, which was central to the new Sub-Committee's role as well as linked to the webinar discussions. The stated and affirmed purpose was: *"How can we work together with people, organisations and other structures to strengthen CD practice in Neighbourhood Centres?"*

This first gathering aimed to identify key individuals and structures which share or intersect with this agenda:

- Shared interest in identifying key players (structures and individuals) who are connected to our agenda in Neighbourhood Centres (and beyond)
- Mapped current activity emerging from QFCA CD sub-committee (and task groups) and potential links with others;
- Started to identify key players (structures and individuals) who are connected to this agenda;
- Started a conversation about parallel processes under QFCA banner (diagram mapped these)
- Identified some potential collaborations:
  - i. O13 collaboration –organisations with whom we may share common interest/agendas/objectives;
  - ii. Establish who is working with the First Nation (FN) people in NCC's
  - iii. Training – identify who is offering what and where, and map this to need;
  - iv. Initial exploration of how a mapping software tool could assist in linking people who want to engage in peer support;

The group that met for this preliminary mapping session understood that this is just a beginning and further work will be required, including digital tools to support state-wide connection and peer support. They recommended that the QFCA CD Sub-Committee ensure this work is carried forward.

### The CD Focus Group

This group met to discuss progress on the issue that they had raised at the CD Conference in 2019. Some of the focus group were not able to attend the webinars because of heavy work commitments but were following progress and keen to see ongoing action. The conversation within this group was both about the need for NCCs to adopt a CD approach and also about barriers. Training was a key issue for these participants. Common issues clearly exist across Neighbourhood Centres, which require further ongoing collective consideration if any change is to become possible.

## DISCUSSION

In all there have been 10 opportunities for focussed conversation about the questions raised at the CD conference. There were also many informal conversations at every level and every point of the process. Within CD method, it is the conversations that lead to momentum and the relationships that can hold the change process.



**CD Method as Relevant to NCCs:** In all of these discussions, participants have agreed to a way of understanding community development as the work that Neighbourhood Centres do, or could do, to enable and support members of the local community to come together around issues of mutual importance, and to act on them together. All have agreed that this is relevant NCC work, that it matters greatly in the present context of growing inequality and community crises, that it is different from the work done with individuals experiencing crisis and is indeed different from the range of community-oriented work NCCs commonly do. NCCs identify that Community Development could however provide the context in which much of that other work gained added meaning, direction and impact. NCCs identified that the skills base for this particular work has largely been lost. A small number of NCCs have maintained a strong CD tradition but most have not.

**What has been lost?** When struggling to understand what has been lost in the absence of a local focus on community development method, NCCs fully appreciated that community members do feel a sense of agency and belonging within the Centre, but when community participants in NCCs raise wider issues that impact their personal lives, there may be an individual advocacy response, but rarely a community development response. The latter would indeed be appropriate where a number of people are struggling with the same issue. Similarly, when looking to place based or collective impact projects within local communities, the role for residents is rarely as strong as it could be, because residents do not feel they have the skills and experience to be serious participants. Centres recognise the value of skilled residents, yet many Centres do not themselves feel skilled or adequately resourced to take an ongoing CD approach.

NCCs identified a number of barriers to taking up the CD method, as described above, and four small groups have formed to discuss the barriers further and find ways beyond them. These groups are led by NCC practitioners who have prior experience with the CD method. The groups will follow the CD method in addressing the barriers. The conversations will start small, and then be expanded to include any interested NCCs. The task groups are not looking for a consultant to prepare a report on the issues or the way forward. That would be a quite different methodology. Rather, they will share with each other how the issues impact, they will explore the forcefields giving rise to the issues, they will look for points of possibility, opportunity, alliance and support and will act together for change. They will invite NCCs who want to participate in new opportunities and share their experience and support. It is a value of the ten discussions, that NCCs are not looking to QFCA to fix their issues for them, but are stepping up to host a change-oriented process with QFCA support.

## CONCLUSION

### The Conference Questions

This project has enabled interested NCC personnel to answer the questions that they raised at the 2019 CD Conference. For some who stayed with the process, there is an acceptance that it is useful to have such a method-based approach which reflects the values and principles. Participating NCCs agreed that it is relevant in today's context, that the structural constraints are significant, and that many of the skills and structural supports for CD have largely been lost. The constraints imposed on practice by a range of changes in policy and in funding practice have been significant. There have been new marketised opportunities, but these too have shifted the emphasis away from community. NCCs said that organisations, including managers and Boards need to understand and support CD and make an organisational commitment to it, which is reflected in policies and constitutions. There needs to be training, peer support and mentoring opportunities for staff, new ways of thinking about organisational frameworks and the kinds of crises that have overwhelmed many NCCs, and much more ongoing discussion between NCCs. Whilst Centres look to QFCA as a primary support for this work, they are not standing back, but offering to lead the way themselves.





Image: Neighbourhood Centre Community Gathering

### QFCA CD Subcommittee Questions

The process also generated responses to the questions raised by the CD Sub-Committee. The substance of the full report deals in depth with extent of, interest in and the constraints and opportunities for CD in NCCs.

In relation to the CD Sub-Committee question about use of web based platforms, NCCs are clear that platforms like Zoom are critical to enabling NCCs to talk with each other, to learn from each other and to progress issues pertinent to them. They are affordable, widely available and, with practice, are becoming easy to use. They are accessible to remote, rural and regional NCCs. Across several QFCA projects throughout 2020, Zoom conferences enabled the Neighbourhood Centre voice to be heard. There are a few limitations in relation to break out groups, workshopping, relationship building and training, where an embodied presence allows deeper learning. On the whole however, NCCs are very positive about the technology.

### Core CD Method

Whilst all practitioners use judgement and flexibility in relation to the requirements of any specific CD project, this approach has argued for a rigorous grasp of a core method. A core method enables daily practice, because CD, like any practice, grows in depth, understanding and skill every day that it is used. A core practice draws on an accumulated body of experience from those who have gone before, and it enables the work to be shared with colleagues and community members, it enables reflection, ongoing learning and can inform training and development. When this is missing, it leads to confusion rather than flexibility, and can increase idealism at the expense of action. This is not to dismiss other CD traditions, or the Centre-based work which NCCs do. All are important and have their place.



## Project Outcomes

To summarise, during this project, QFCA has trialled a way of working which enables issues to be raised, discussed widely and progressed by members. This has had a number of outcomes:

- It has contributed to a core aspect of QFCA strategic plan being achieved;
- Along with other 2020 initiatives, it has affirmed QFCA as an innovative organisation;
- It has identified and enabled new leadership for the NCC sector, from within QFCA members;
- It has raised interest and understanding of Community Development across the NCC sector;
- NCCs have articulated a need for CD education, training, mentoring and peer support, and have raised their hands to lead this forward;
- NCC's have raised the need for discussion about the framing of individual crisis work within NCCs. The escalation of this overwhelms Centres and sidelines other necessary work. A new NCC-led group is forming to discuss whether and how it is possible to approach crisis work differently within a CD organisation (See Appendix 3); and
- A number of Centres are interested in exploring a whole-of-organisation framework which can provide the safety support and know-how at each level of CD practice. One NC will take the lead in this group (See Appendix 3).

For these outcomes to have sustainable impact, the work must continue, and this is the emphasis of the recommendations. This executive summary along with the full report and appendices will go to the QFCA Community Development Sub-Committee, for consideration and recommendation to QFCA Board.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The understanding of community development method as put forward in this report be adopted by the QFCA CD Sub-Committee and recommended to QFCA Board as an endorsed method to inform NCC practice, training, supervision and mentoring. (Note: this is not to suggest it is the only or best approach, but that it provides a coherent methodology which has sufficient existing infrastructure in Queensland to ensure access to training and support; where NCCs have adopted a different coherent CD methodology, perhaps developed in another State, it will become easier to identify and acknowledge this and draw connections between it and this recommended approach).
2. The QFCA CD Sub-Committee receives, reviews and endorses this report and recommends it to the QFCA Board;
3. The QFCA CD Sub-Committee develops a proposal to the Board that the work emerging from this project, carried by NCCs, be supported and resourced with both an allocation of staff time and a small amount of funds to enable the work to progress;
4. All emerging matters from the CD Sub-Committee and NCC work during 2020 be fed into the considerations of the QFCA 2023 Strategic Plan review;
5. QFCA consider how the CD agenda fits in the overall review of the organisation and how it can be sustainably embedded in the QFCA structure. For example, it may be important to review the objects and have a CD Standing Committee embedded in the constitution;
6. QFCA consider how leadership from amongst NCCs on issues that they have raised can be structured into the organisation so that leadership stays with the NCCs;
7. The webinar participants are recommending to the CD Sub-Committee that QFCA support and maintain the agenda of strengthening CD across NCCs, including:
  - Ongoing mapping of allies in strengthening CD;
  - Ongoing review of funding arrangements;
  - Ongoing strengthening of CD governance and management across Neighbourhood Centres;
  - Ongoing strengthening of CD and related practices; and
  - Development of an active program in relation to First Nations and NCCs.
8. QFCA intensify the dialogue with the Department of Communities and other government Departments, with a view to building a shared understanding of the outcomes that can be anticipated using the CD approach, what it takes to achieve those outcomes, and the various ways governments can support communities in their development; and
9. QFCA maintain advocacy over funding, including funding for research, development and evaluation so that the knowledge base of what can be achieved locally is expanded.







