Queensland Neighbourhood Centres and Community Development: Remembering our Past and Adapting for the Future

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Background

Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland have played a key role in the Community Development movement since the late-1960s. University of Queensland Social Work Lecturer Les Halliwell established the Queensland Community Development Conference in 1974. Les Halliwell worked with three local churches and local residents to establish *Inala Community House* in 1966, Queensland's earliest and longest running Neighbourhood Centre and its establishment served as a model for further community-based initiatives during the *Australian Assistance Plan* (AAP) in 1973 and beyond. The AAP was Australia's first national social policy for community development.

As the Neighbourhood Centre, Family Support and Community Development initiatives began to grow together into the 1980s, networks of organisations began to meet regularly, eventually leading to the establishment of the *Community Centres and Family Support Network Association of Queensland* (CCFSNAQ). As well as meeting in regional networks across the state, the network held state meetings in conjunction with the biennial *Queensland Community Development Conference*. This state meeting identified issues affecting Neighbourhood Centres and Family Support organisations for joint advocacy, support and policy development whilst also creating the opportunity for sharing community development method and practice at the conference over the following days.

On the day before the 2023 Queensland Community Development Conference at Sandstone Point, *Neighbourhood Centres Queensland* (formerly the CCFSNAQ) hosted a Neighbourhood Centres State-wide gathering. A state meeting of Neighbourhood Centres had not been held in the sector for many years due to numerous factors expanded upon below. After over 10 years of struggle, the sector has fought hard to see community development re-invigorated in the Neighbourhood Centre movement and to see the sector featured strongly in social policy. The 2023 state-wide gathering marked a significant milestone in the journey of the sector and heralds a new beginning for Neighbourhood Centres throughout the state.

The Impacts of Changing Social Policy

From the 1980s, and as successive governments adopted an increasing political focus on neoliberalism, the ensuing cost-cutting saw a gradual decline of focus on community development method and practice in the sector. Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland were significantly impacted by a "*perfect storm*" of events in 2012 and 2013 (Betts et al, 2021). After the Global Financial Crisis in 2007/2008, a range of radical austerity measures and social policy changes were implemented by the Liberal-National Government under Premier Campbell Newman. Immediately after his election, all Neighbourhood Centres had funding cut by 10% and the CCFSNAQ was totally de-funded, affecting not only centres' ability to operate effectively but their ability to meet together. CCFSNAQ funding was purely "*Community Liaison Funding*" and this funding supported regional networks of Neighbourhood Centres to meet together and also attend and resource their state-wide gathering attached to the biennial CD Conference. Without funding for travel, administration costs and other associated expenses, many networks became more fragmented and statewide meetings became more challenging for the sector to attend, particularly those from rural and remote locations in our geographically large state.

On a national level, the human services sector also faced industrial turmoil as the result of the *Equal Remuneration Order* handed down by the *Fair Work Commission*. Non-constitutional corporations in Queensland, including Neighbourhood Centres were especially impacted by extra remuneration for employees and large amounts of back pay due to pay equity regulations in March and December 2012 creating a massive financial strain for organisations with reduced funding. To ensure financial sustainability, centres were encouraged to pursue more siloed service delivery approaches, rather than community development. Neighbourhood Centres began delivering services of all kinds, more corporatised approaches were adopted and some centres amalgamated into larger nonprofit companies limited by guarantee. These strategies were adopted to enable business models that were more attractive to funding providers, created structures that enabled fee-for-service activities to generate income and allowed for geographical expansion including national possibilities. Government sought efficiency to reduce expenditure in social services funding, favouring larger providers and fewer contracts rather than a large number of smaller contracts with small organisations.

Additionally, the *Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry* undertaken by Tim Carmody, recommended reducing strain on the *Department of Child Safety* by diverting responses to intensive family support services run by professional case workers. Until then, traditional family support programs based in neighbourhood centres utilised volunteers and community-based early interventions to support families at risk.

Each of these factors led to the architecture of the Neighbourhood Centre sector and Family Support organisations across Queensland changing significantly, with many organisations moving away from traditions that had been at the core of the movement, in order to financially survive or be in greater alignment with government social policy. While some held fast to community development by integrating it into service

models, many Neighbourhood Centres moved away from the method to become service hubs, obtaining whatever funds they could to keep their doors open.

Re-discovering and Re-positioning for a Community Development Ethos

CCFSNAQ renamed itself the *Queensland Families and Communities Association* (QFCA) in 2013 and, in 2019, worked to re-establish the connection between the sector and the Queensland Community Development conference. The 2019 CD conference reignited the sector's passion for community development and after a mandate was issued to the QFCA by conference attendees. Workers and volunteers had a deep desire to better understand how community development could be integrated again into the practice of neighbourhood centres. As the COVID-19 pandemic forced the state into lockdown in 2020, a formal research project into community development in Neighbourhood Centres was instigated via online webinars (Betts et al, 2021). The research included academics from Griffith University - Helen Betts and Dr Ann Ingamells, Neighbourhood Centre representatives and practitioners that had been integral to the entire Neighbourhood Centre movement for five decades, including Carmel Daveson, Maria Tennant and Bea Rogan. COVID-19 created space for Neighbourhood Centres to pause and reflect on the sector's practice and purpose.

Neighbourhood Centres were re-discovering their calling as citizen-led organisations being grounded in place and driven by community development traditions. The pandemic presented challenges for not only the sector, but local communities. As many centres stayed open for essential services, they were still active on the phones, online and in providing support in any way they could. Many centres delivered emergency relief and other assistance through their windows while wearing facemasks to maintain face-to-face community connection. Pandemic lockdowns moved local communities back to their neighbourhoods. Community members discovered the importance of using their local park for exercise, visiting their corner store, getting in touch with their neighbours and building connections on a local level. This was also true for local social support as many larger state-wide organisations closed their doors and support was offered on a small scale through community organisations. Neighbourhood Centres were playing a vital role in the midst of the pandemic, offering communities the latest information about COVID-19, the use of mobile apps to enable community members to access venues but also enabling community to help and support one another.

Such a movement, back to more local ways of undertaking development in communities, is reminiscent of E.F. Schumacher's seminal text, "***Small is Beautiful***" (1973), emphasising the importance of small geographies, small economies and small organisations in a world of unrestrained capitalist expansion. He asserts that development should be concentrated at a small, regional district level rather than aimed at large geographies. Using examples from India and Italy, he argues that large development and welfare projects ignore the nuances of regional areas and concentrate too much on populations in narrow metropolitan areas. His concerns about the pitfalls of large organisations responding to large markets, becoming increasingly bureaucratic, serves as a warning to community service organisations that have lost sight of people and local communities. Social services that had moved away from small ways of working in localities because of corporatisation and amalgamation discovered the limitations of unsustainable market growth through the lesson of COVID-19. Mostly small, community-based organisations such as Neighbourhood Centres thrived and were found to be very effective in their responses during the restrictions because of their emphasis on smaller geographical areas; their focus on neighbourhood responses, local economies and organisational nimbleness.

With this new perspective and momentum, the infrastructure of QFCA was built throughout this period with disaster strategy project funding and a new strategic direction with the assistance of Belinda Drew from the *Community Services Industry Alliance* (CSIA). A working group was formed consisting of Tomas Passeggi (President), Chris Mundy (Sector Development Officer), Bea Rogan (Secretary), Jenny Ryan (Board Member), Dr Ann Ingamells and the support of Executive Officer Geoff Roberson. In 2020, QFCA received funding from the Department to design a new reporting and performance framework for Neighbourhood Centres and the organisation's first CEO, Em James, was employed. An annual sector survey, designed on a ***Social Return on Investment*** model used by *Neighbourhood Houses Victoria* was also introduced to demonstrate the value of community development and neighbourhood centre practices to stakeholders.

In November 2020, as the pandemic was still impacting Queenslanders, Minister Leeanne Enoch was appointed as *Minister of Communities, Housing and the Digital Economy* and immediately gave Neighbourhood Centres priority. A First Nations, *Quandamooka* woman from Stradbroke Island, she called for a Parliamentary Inquiry into *Loneliness and Social Isolation* and formed a *Sector Repositioning Committee* (SRC) for Neighbourhood Centres. The role of the SRC was to embark on a co-design process to establish an agreed purpose, program logic, investment and reporting framework for State Government investment into Neighbourhood Centres. Rather than reinvent the wheel, the committee would draw on the *Results Based Accountability* trial in 2015, *Investment Management Standard* process in 2017, *Griffith University Research Reports* in 2018 and 2019, and the QFCA *Reporting Framework* in 2020. The SRC consisted of Neighbourhood Centre representatives from the QFCA and additionally representatives from Qld Community Alliance, CSIA, Volunteering Qld and Logan Together.

After successfully escalating the issue, in 2021, Minister Enoch announced a *Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation*. After the events of COVID-19 and numerous lockdowns, loneliness was highlighted as a significant issue in the community; however, the move was also a political one. If an inquiry of this nature could highlight the significant work of Neighbourhood Centres and demonstrate it was key social infrastructure to address social isolation, their profile would be lifted within Government, leading to increased

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investment and positioning in social policy. QFCA encouraged the sector to participate as much as possible, undertaking a submission writing campaign that articulated the work of centres and argued for increasing funding to address loneliness and social isolation. Written submissions were received from 53 Neighbourhood Centres and during public hearings, 17 centres were asked to speak and answer questions from the Inquiry Committee in their investigations. The committee's report was handed down, recommending various strategies to tackle loneliness and social isolation in the state and specifically the role of Neighbourhood Centres.

After working with the sector and the Department of Communities and gathering yearly data about the effectiveness of Neighbourhood Centres, a focused budget bid and participatory advocacy strategy was implemented following the inquiry. QFCA knew it needed to articulate its core business more clearly, so after sector consultation changed its name to *Neighbourhood Centres Queensland* (NCQ). It developed a clear budget ask with the sector and using participation as its core strategy, encouraged centres to write and meet with their local MP about the work of their centre and articulate what difference funding increase would make. Along with Centres, NCQ attended many meetings with Ministers and Members of Parliament to support this work and wrote to every elected official in the state providing Neighbourhood Centre budget asks and the 2021 Sector Impact Report containing key data about the sector. Others, such as the CSIA, Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS), Queensland Community Alliance (QCA) and internal department staff also advocated for centres to sway the Department of Treasury to consider the proposals being made.

It was important to NCQ that the people most affected (Neighbourhood Centre coordinators, staff and board members) were active in their own advocacy. This method drew principles from *People Centred Advocacy* (Samuel 2002). As an underfunded, predominately female workforce, the sector mirrored their "*at-risk*" communities in that they themselves were experiencing disadvantage in the context of the human services sector. Rather than NCQ and other bodies solely advocating on behalf of the centres, the practice of enabling and empowering the marginalised to speak for themselves played an important role in the advocacy process.

Furthermore, established networks beyond just a small locality were given priority. Neighbourhood Centre networks based in geographic areas can be described in terms of impact networks (Erlichman 2022). Over many decades, these networks have existed to intentionally identify and enact social change for the sector in a strategic and coordinated way; however, meta-networking as theorised by Alison Gilchrist (2009), also featured strongly. Gilchrist argues that communities are complex systems with overlapping networks of formal and informal social and organisational relationships. These complex systems self-organise over long periods of time in their struggle for social change. Different overlapping relationships between networks emerge to effectively overcome boundaries and challenges that may be apparent across various localities. With the support of NCQ, the sector was able to enhance its meta-networking capability and widen its web of political relationships.

Some Neighbourhood Centres were also involved in the *Queensland Community Alliance* (QCA 2024), drawing on another community development advocacy tradition. QCA uses community organising frameworks and advocacy methods based on those developed by Saul Alinsky (1972). The method focuses on identifying and building collective power to *confront* systems and structures which hold power in a public setting. A number of QCA "*assemblies*" took place over previous years in which politicians were directly asked to increase Neighbourhood Centre funding. NCQ supported centres who wished to be involved in this style of advocacy, but also chose to take a more *relational* approach to political relationship building. Principles were drawn from craftivist movements which emphasise '*gentle activism*' (Corbett 2017), demonstrating the sector's compassionate, inclusive and community orientated approach.

The advocacy of the sector paid off, leading in the 2022/2023 budget to the most significant funding boost for Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland's history, committing to a $115.8million investment into the sector including:

- Increasing the baseline funding to $230,000 per centre
- An additional $20,000 per year operating in non-state Government buildings
- $9million to improve existing centre buildings
- $39million to construct 6 new centres
- $9.3million for 20 more Community Connect workers
- $4million innovation fund to support community-led initiatives targeting loveliness and social isolation.
- Peak body funding

The funding increase was closely followed by a range of social policies perfectly aligned with Neighbourhood Centres; a 10-year strategic plan for the state was unveiled by the Queensland Government entitled "*Communities 2032*" (DCHDE 2022), focusing on equity, access, participation, human rights and empowerment through place-based community-led principles. Neighbourhood Centres perfectly aligned with the new vision and featured centrally in its action plan. A shared vision document about Neighbourhood Centres was released in December 2023 by the Department of Treaty, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts* (DTATSIPCA 2023b), as a tool for funded and unfunded centres and articulated the new shared purpose and framework for centres across the state.

New Neighbourhood Centre Guidelines

New contracts and guidelines were implemented in the sector in October 2023, returning to the core traditions of the Neighbourhood Centre movement for the modern

context. Three activity dimensions were emphasised as the core components of all Neighbourhood Centres: 1) *linking people with formal and informal support*; 2) *creating social connections and inclusion*; and 3) *integrating local community action*, which is defined in the Neighbourhood Centre Initiative guidelines as having a focus on community development. In collaboration with NCQ, the Department of Communities included a detailed description of community development in the new Neighbourhood Centre initiative guidelines:

"Community Development refers to a range of processes led by members of a community who have identified a concern or aspiration for their community. The community may be place-based in a geographical area or a community of people that have a shared identity or association. Community members are seen as experts in their own lives and locality, and the process values their knowledge and wisdom. While professional knowledge and expertise supports the process, the direction is determined by community members. They are enabled to take a leadership role, from deciding on issues they want to address, to planning and implementing actions, through to evaluation. By working together, communities experience increased empowerment, capacity, skills, civic participation and self-determination. The outcomes of community development can be varied depending on the identified issue and range from improved social justice or human rights outcomes, to increased employment and economic opportunities, to improved community infrastructure and disaster resilience.

Community Development is often conducted by an agency, such as a Neighbourhood Centre, that supports the community group to identify the issue and take collective action. Community Development projects often have many stages over a long period of time as they move towards the desired social change. Projects normally start with identifying community issues, through community listening or analysis, then forming groups of people who want to take local action on a specific issue. Project workers assist this process of development with facilitation skills, group planning, information gathering and enabling project actions. A goal of Community Development projects is sustainability, so the work has a chance of continuing on long-term without the direct input of a worker". (DTASIPCA 2023a:11-12)

The description draws on the community development definition provided by Kenny and Conners (2017) which emphasises empowerment, human rights, inclusion, social justice, self-determination and collective action as well as Ife's (2016) emphasis on community members being developed as leaders to challenge and improve conditions that impact wellbeing. "*Community*" is briefly defined for the purpose of Neighbourhood Centre Work, as people who live in a shared geographical location and those with a shared interest in community activities. It seeks to also broaden the scope of concerns that communities may respond to, that includes more international development topics applied at a local level, such as employment and economic development (Kingsbury et al. 2012). This recognises the importance of current Neighbourhood Centre activities in the realms of skilling people for work,

microenterprises and social enterprises. The importance of disaster response is also emphasised as the sector is involved with community-led disaster preparation and recovery (Rawsthorne et al. 2023).

The description not only seeks to theoretically define community development but emphasises that community development is also a practice and a process. It broadly references the participatory methods outlined by Kelly and Westoby (2018) and is grounded in not only community concerns, but its aspirations and involvement in every level of the process. Additionally, the description drew from a practice framework previously theorised from participatory advocacy work conducted by NCQ with the sector to achieve funding and social policy change for Neighbourhood Centres. This framework is a simple three step model for community development:

1) Hearing the Concern - Hearing what people are concerned about on an individual basis and identifying common themes.

2) Strategic Planning - Joining people up according to common concerns and strategically planning together, including identifying extra people, data and resources that can help the group achieve its objectives.

3) Collective Action - Doing the work together, including working groups, sub-committees and individuals taking on roles to achieve change.

The description ends with highlighting the goal of social sustainability of community development projects (Lathouras 2010). This is significant in the context of the previously mentioned organisational expansion of centres due to social policy that encouraged growth and corporatisation. Without social sustainability as a goal, the risk for centres undertaking community development projects is that the end goal is another community service or activity to expand the organisation, rather than grow the capacity of the community to lead and sustain projects it has identified.

A range of reporting mechanisms are included in the Department of Communities' funding requirements for Neighbourhood Centres, including "*integrating local community action*" (DTASTIPCA 2023a). This reporting requires Neighbourhood Centres to submit the number of community development projects and to provide a practice example (case study) of a project. The case study allows for different phases of a community development process to be recorded such as identifying the community concern or opportunity, planning and codesign, actions with community and evaluation. Demographics, issue descriptions and local actions can also be recorded as well as project goals.

The guidelines stipulate that these measures seek to record only certain projects that are facilitated or actively supported by the Neighbourhood Centre. These are projects that are designed *with*, rather than *for* community members, to benefit groups, or the whole community (DTATIPCA, 2023a:ix). This reporting requirement emphasises that community development is a community-led practice,

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rather than an organisational initiative or service. The reporting serves to structurally embed local community development as an approach and a practice standing in contrast to previous social policy that emphasised services, corporatisation and market growth. Additionally, as the sector engages with the process of reporting and analysis with DTATSIPCA, further knowledge about community development and associated measurement techniques can be discussed and enhanced with the sector. Lathouras (2012) emphasises the importance of community development practitioners in Neighbourhood Centres to engage in critical reflection and collective analysis. A remarkable feature in this new context, however, is that community development reflection and analysis will be conducted by both the sector and Government in both a bottom-up and top-down manner. From a bottom-up level, numerous communities of practice are emerging in the sector with practitioners seeking to share and develop knowledge with one another and from a top-down perspective, data collection will be analysed and presented back to the sector in visualised form for further learnings. It will also be shared internally within Government for the purpose of accountability of public expenditure. Such critical reflection is vital as both the sector and Government develop their knowledge of community development around what is effective and what needs improvement (Rawsthorne & Howard 2011).

Queensland CD Conference 2023 - Neighbourhood Centres Day

The CD Conference 2023 came at a crucial moment in Queensland Neighbourhood Centre history. Firstly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference had not occurred in person since 2019, meaning that there had been no opportunity for Neighbourhood Centres to come together on a state-wide level for 4 years. Secondly, the sector had undergone significant changes since the prior CD Conference. The CD mandate issued to the peak organisation had been progressed, numerous developments had occurred in the sector with the Queensland Government and the increase in funding meant that the Neighbourhood Centre sector was experiencing growth in workforce numbers. The new Neighbourhood Centre guidelines (DTATSIPCA 2023a), shared vision (DTATSIPCA 2023b), relationship with the Department of Communities and growing workforce meant it was an opportune time to reinstate a state-wide Neighbourhood Centre gathering on the day prior to the conference to build sector culture, unity, collaboration and inspiration as a collective.

NCQ invited Neighbourhood Centre coordinators and community development workers to the day along with specific Department of Communities representatives. The aim of including these Government employees was to tangibly demonstrate a shift in Government thinking towards the sector, to one of mutuality and partnership. Likewise, it was an opportunity for these representatives to hear the concerns and ambitions of the sector so they could further internal work within Government to enact structural change and adjust social policy where needed. Including NCQ staff members, 160 participants registered for the day, marking one of the largest Neighbourhood Centre

gatherings in Queensland's history.

The day commenced with an acknowledgement of country by Sascha Bee, a First Nations Neighbourhood Centre coordinator from Normanton Neighbourhood Centre – a centre governed by the Indigenous-controlled organisation *Bynoe Community Advancement Cooperative Society*. Following was a presentation by Chris Mundy, Sector Lead in Policy and Research giving an overview of the sector's history in Queensland to date which led into an exercise in which participants placed themselves within the sector's history with one another. This gave participants the opportunity to see themselves as part of the *Settlement House/Neighbourhood Centre* movement (Briggs & McCartney 2011; Addams 1910; Lathouras 2020; Williams 1988). It reinforced the community development foundations of the movement, integrated new workforce participants into the culture of the sector and gave context to the following session which would expand on the new Neighbourhood Centre guidelines.

Beginning with Toynbee Hall in 1884, through the work of Canon Samuel Barnett and his wife Henrietta Barnett, the settlement house and neighbourhood centre movement emerged in East London and quickly spread throughout the United Kingdom (Briggs & McCartney 2011). It began by focusing on structural change in disadvantaged localities through community facilities that were inhabited by educated volunteers working in partnership with community members in poverty. Rather than focus on welfare-driven responses, place-based community building and education activities were conducted as well as social reform and activism. As the movement spread to the United States, it received further renown through the work of Jane Addams at Hull House (Addams 1910). Winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, she approached her work through principles of social democracy and mutual accompaniment, ensuring that communities, rather than services are at the forefront of social change (Lathouras 2020). The movement spread to Australia through Sydney University Women's Society in the 1890s where the first settlement house was established in Chippendale amongst urban Aboriginal communities in 1908 (Williams 1988). The movement did not fully expand throughout the nation until the 1970s, with the support of Australia's first national social policy for community development, the *Australian Assistance Plan* (Rooney 2011).

By reclaiming modern Neighbourhood Centres' place within the long-standing Settlement House movement, Queensland's centres and staff could be grounded in the original intention of the tradition and identify key principles that lay at their foundation, particularly those that are shared with community development theory and practice.

Neighbourhood Centre regional networks were highlighted by NCQ president Alana Wahl in 10 locations: Far-North-Queensland, North-Queensland, Wide-Bay Burnett, Far-West-Remote, Sunshine Coast, South-West Area Network, Logan, Ipswich and West-Moreton, South-Brisbane and North-Brisbane. Various Neighbourhood Centres shared collaborative projects they were working on within these networks, including Whitsunday and Bowen Neighbourhood Centres that were planning a Social Enterprise Conference in 2024. These

stories of collaboration in regional networks emphasised the importance of Neighbourhood Centres working with and supporting one another to foster unity and to utilise participatory processes within the sector itself, to create systems change, build capacity and respond to challenges.

The second part of the day focused on the new shared vision for Neighbourhood Centres between the Queensland Government, NCQ and the sector itself. The session began with NCQ CEO Em James introducing a presentation by Belinda Drew in her new role as Deputy Director General of the Department of Treaty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts (DTATSIPCA). Belinda spoke about her start in the sector at Eagleby Neighbourhood Centre and expanded upon the extensive co-design process that had occurred between the sector and the Department through the Strategic Repositioning Committee. A panel discussion led by Em James followed with members of the committee, including Belinda Drew, Brad McCoy (DTASIPCA), Tomas Passeggi (NCQ Board/Caloundra Community Centre), Louise Judge (NCQ Board/Chinchilla Community Centre) and Sandra Elton (Qld Community Alliance/NCQ Board/North-Townsville Community Hub). The committee expanded upon the codesign process, the role the sector played in "*pushing back*" against Government and the formation of the new *Shared Vision, Initiative Guidelines* and *Reporting Framework*. The discussion highlighted a genuine partnership being formed between the Neighbourhood Centre sector and the Department, the importance of listening to the sector and the work moving forward. It was acknowledged that due to the lack of focus on community development over many years, Neighbourhood Centres may struggle to implement the third activity dimension; however, the Department emphasised that the process of transition to the new guidelines would be soft, and understanding would be offered by all parties in moving to the new method of working.

Recognising the anxiety that sections of the sector were experiencing around reporting on community development, the following session was led by Dr Tina Lathouras from the University of the Sunshine Coast with support from Natasha Odgers from NCQ. Tina has extensive community development experience in not only an academic capacity, but also because of her long-term work in Neighbourhood Centres and her role as the president of the CCFSNAQ (now NCQ).

She explained that, typically, practice in the sector can be seen as two siloed approaches - *participatory*

The Developmental Continuum

Figure 1 Developmental Continuum

development practice and *service delivery* approaches (Kelly & Westoby, 2018: 16). Approaches that are working to deliver services *to* or *for "clients"* are seen as antithetical to participatory, citizen-led, co-designed approaches to community development (Lathouras & Westoby, 2023). With her background in neighbourhood centre practice, Tina had theorised the below "*developmental continuum*" (Lathouras, 2010), where practitioners traverse between a *bottom-up* (citizen-led) practice and *top-down* (worker-led) practice.

Using this framework, Neighbourhood Centres could locate their current practice on the continuum for the various factors or elements listed. The invitation was to think about how they could push that practice into a more developmental, bottom-up frame when opportunities arise to do so. Following this explanation and to ground the theory, an example tackling the rising cost of living was offered outlining both service responses and developmental responses to the issue. Attendees in the group then identified how activities could be applied to their Neighbourhood Centre context and what actions they would need to take to move activities along the continuum making practice more developmental, or citizen-led. Volunteers with knowledge of community development practice were designated to each of the 20 table groups and certain tables were designated to Neighbourhood Centre managers to encourage the structural embedding of participatory development within organisations. This process was designed because community development can be hard to do on the ground if managers and management committees don't understand the nuances of the practice, especially in terms of the slowness of the work or the seeming 'messiness' of the work in the early phases. This activity also enabled centres to identify current activities that would fall within the Neighbourhood Centre guidelines as community development practice, so they could report underneath the activity dimension "*integrating local community action*".

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The final session of the day included participants working together in groups around topics of mutual concern. Topics included community development peer learning circles, unfunded Neighbourhood Centres, building infrastructure, housing and homelessness, emergency relief, First Nations allyship, media, branding and community transport. This activity created an opportunity for Neighbourhood Centres staff to begin to work developmentally on issues together. Each group essentially became a practice example for community development process around their desired topic. After identifying the issue of concern, centres were given the opportunity to explore ways they might be able to self-organise to create social change together. Relationships and connections were made for further collective action after the day's events.

Following the state-wide gathering, Neighbourhood Centre staff and volunteers participated in the Queensland Community Development Conference as both attendees and presenters. Numerous workshops were conducted by centres about their community development practice so others could learn about practice and how it could be structurally embedded within organisations. This further inspired, equipped and enabled centres to fulfil the new guidelines by the Queensland Government to undertake developmental activities.

Our Next Challenge - Ongoing Community Development Resources

While community development is a significant part of the new Neighbourhood Centre guidelines, no provision has been made by the Queensland Government for education and training in the practice. Community development courses at a tertiary level in the state have gradually disappeared over the last 10 years, despite an increase in social policy focus on "*place-based community-led initiatives*" (DCHDE 2022). One might find that some universities offer community development courses as part of a social work degree program.

Recognising the training and education deficit to support the implementation of the new guidelines, NCQ embarked on an *Asset Based Community Development Approach* (ABCD) (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993) to identify and map Community Development training assets that could be used by Neighbourhood Centres. With the support of the Jeder Institute (2024), NCQ put a call out to all CD trainers and educators across the state to meet together online to discuss the new guidelines and identify who could deliver training to the sector. Of particular interest were workshops that could be delivered to regional networks, centre staff, volunteers and management committees, mentoring for practitioners, peer learning circles, online courses and written material. This information was gathered and compiled into a document distributed at the Neighbourhood Centres state-wide gathering and as a follow-up to the conference. All centres were encouraged to further engage with these resources to continue to foster their practice and encourage Community Development throughout the sector. A number of community development workshops by private trainers followed the conference in both online and in-person

version and several peer learning circles have been established with Neighbourhood Centre regional networks.

Conclusion

The 2024 Queensland Community Development Conference and Neighbourhood Centres Statewide gathering marked a significant moment for community development in the state. Not only is community development back on the agenda for Neighbourhood Centres, but it is also embedded in the Queensland Government's funding requirements.

The Neighbourhood Centre state-wide gathering assisted in preparing the sector for this change and ensured the sector does this together. The day focused on building a culture of partnership, collaboration, unity, support and participation in a way led by staff and volunteers of the centres, rather than by its peak body or a government agency. Developmental principles were fostered in the Neighbourhood Centre community and as it is practiced in the sector, it can be replicated in the communities in which centres operate.

The Queensland Community Development conference enabled Neighbourhood Centres to explore developmental practice within communities, especially with First Nations people. This was particularly significant given the recent national government's referendum on First Nations Recognition and Voice to Parliament and its majority rejection by voters. Conference presentations and workshops demonstrated that Neighbourhood Centres are already undertaking excellent work in this area and there is much to learn from one another. The conference encouraged a hopeful way forward after the referendum based on developmental practice in local communities. The conference dinner "*party*" was a time for celebration and fun for the sector to connect with each other, sing and dance to build connection and joy.

As the Neighbourhood Centre sector moves forward with optimism from these events, the ongoing connection and support, especially in the form of ongoing community development training, education and mentoring, needs to be maintained as it embraces a new beginning.

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