

# Walk alongside

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Co-designing  
social initiatives with  
people experiencing  
vulnerabilities



## About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society. VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals involved in social policy debates.

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# Introduction to Co-design and 'ground-up' solutions

There is growing recognition among public and community organisations that we need to work more closely with people experiencing vulnerabilities, in order to deeply understand their needs and make a significant impact in resolving complex social problems. A recent report indicated that 1.5 million Australians are experiencing chronic disadvantage, despite two decades of sustained economic growth.<sup>1</sup> Children born within disadvantaged households are more likely to experience disadvantage throughout their lifetime, and approximately one in four people who find their way out of poverty return again within two years.<sup>2</sup> We are challenged by pervasive issues of mental health and substance abuse, poverty, unaffordable housing and homelessness, violence and abuse, Indigenous disadvantage and unemployment. To compound these issues, Australia faces the threat of a diminishing tax base, possibly reducing resources available to tackle wicked social problems in future.<sup>3</sup> We need to make sure that the services and programs we implement to address these issues accurately and effectively target need. This is the pursuit of real solutions for social problems.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of these issues, and it perhaps seems overly optimistic to speak about 'solving them' in a definitive way. And yet to achieve progress we need to remain optimistic.<sup>4</sup> We need to work from a central belief that it is possible for social initiatives to have a profound impact on improving the lives of vulnerable Australians and breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Optimism drives social innovation because it means we do not accept social dysfunction as hopelessly inevitable. Instead, we see the possibility of doing things better for those experiencing discord and insecurity.<sup>5</sup> It is what inspires practitioners and policy-makers to look for new ways to approach issues, which are beyond the current limits of their professional knowledge and expertise.

Finding the right way to approach social problems involves partnering with the people who face them head on.<sup>6</sup> This is because their perspectives and living realities will largely determine whether an initiative will actually be effective in context, and how far it will go in meeting their needs. Unfortunately, traditional feedback methods only ask for target group input after a program or service has been planned or implemented. At this point, practitioners have already formed a clear idea of the problem and the range of possible 'solutions' which follow on from it.<sup>7</sup>

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1 Committee for Economic Development of Australia, *Addressing Entrenched Disadvantage in Australia*, 2015, accessed from [http://adminpanel.ceda.com.au/FOLDERS/Service/Files/Documents/26005~CEDAAaddressing entrencheddisadvantageinAustralia April2015.pdf](http://adminpanel.ceda.com.au/FOLDERS/Service/Files/Documents/26005~CEDAAaddressing%20entrencheddisadvantageinAustralia%20April2015.pdf) on 9 June 2015.

2 *ibid*

3 Australian Government, *2015 Intergenerational Report*, 2015, accessed from [http://d3v4mnyz9ontea.cloudfront.net/2015IGR\\_Overview.pdf](http://d3v4mnyz9ontea.cloudfront.net/2015IGR_Overview.pdf) on 9 June 2015.

4 IDEO, *The Field Guide to Human-Centred Design*, accessed from: <http://www.designkit.org/resources/1/> on 20 May 2015.

5 *ibid*

6 M Steen, M Manschot & N Koning, 'Benefits of co-design in service design projects', *International Journal of Design*, 5(2), 53–60, 2011.

7 T Brown & J Wyatt, 'Design thinking for social innovation', *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 8(1), 31–35, 2010.

Organisational and resourcing factors have been ordered or cemented around these assumptions and, at this late stage, these variables are difficult to drastically shift.<sup>8</sup> The way in which feedback is obtained is also commonly closed-off from gauging new insights and alternative understandings of the issue, because it is framed in relation to a pre-conceived conceptualisation of problem and program solution. In addition, program effectiveness is also measured by existing user satisfaction, though services can struggle to retain the participation of those who are most vulnerable.<sup>9</sup>

This approach is inefficient. By only involving people after an initiative has gone live, we are channelling resources into a prescribed solution, without a strong basis for understanding whether it will be an effective approach for the people it is attempting to reach.<sup>10</sup> Program development can be derived from extensive expertise, professional knowledge and research, but without a deep understanding of the needs and living realities of a target group, we cannot know how to apply it. Initiatives therefore run a high risk of wasting time and resources on a solution which has not been refined and tested in context, and can fail to make a sustained impact on social problems at an individual and community level.<sup>11</sup> As a result, support systems are not doing what we want them to do or not progressing far enough,<sup>12</sup> despite the commitment and unwavering efforts of practitioners on the ground.

In the spirit of optimism, we can see this as an opportunity to re-think the way we develop and implement policy and programs. We can step outside ordinary practice to discover new ways of working, which ensure the perspectives, needs and realities of people remain central to service design from the onset.

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- 8 C Christenson, H Baumann, R Ruggles & T Sadtler, 'Disruptive innovation for social change', *Harvard Business Review*, 6, 2006.
  - 9 Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, *Engaging marginalised and vulnerable families*, accessed from [http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/PB18\\_Vulnerable\\_families.pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/PB18_Vulnerable_families.pdf) on 30 April 2015.
  - 10 D Boyle & M Harris, *The challenge of co-production*, NEF, retrieved from <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/the-challenge-of-co-production> on 23 April 2015.
  - 11 C Vanstone, 'Dangerous ideas can lead to better results', *Public Administration Today*, 13, 14–17, 2014.
  - 12 I Burkett, *A Case for Change: Why we need to change the way we generate social impact*, Centre for Social Innovation, 2012, retrieved from [http://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/The\\_Case\\_for\\_Change\\_-\\_2012.pdf](http://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/The_Case_for_Change_-_2012.pdf) on 1 May 2015.

Co-design involves coming alongside people who experience vulnerabilities, to work with them in creating interventions, services and programs which will work in the context of their lives, and will reflect their own values and goals.

This involves letting go of professional assumptions about a group's perspectives and experiences and actively learning from what people say and do. Expertise, professional knowledge and research can then be considered in relation to group input, to add colour to the possibilities of approaching social problems with specific groups.

This is different from traditional feedback methods which ask user groups to comment on their use and satisfaction of services that have already been planned or implemented.

Co-design begins with the people – their experiences, perspectives, values, challenges and understandings.

# Come to their table: what is Co-design for services and programs?

Co-design involves coming alongside people who experience vulnerabilities, to work with them in creating interventions, services and programs which will work in the context of their lives and will reflect their own values and goals. This involves letting go of professional assumptions about a group's perspectives and experiences and actively learning from what people say and do. Expertise, professional knowledge and research is then considered in relation to group input, to add colour to the possibilities of approaching social problems with specific groups.

Currently, those who are most vulnerable are less likely to access services, maintain their participation, or demonstrate a sustained engagement.<sup>13</sup> These groups are commonly characterised as being 'hard to reach,' inferring that the problem exists with the people rather than the capacity of services to engage them.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, efforts to 'reach' these groups focus on 'bridging the gap' between people and existing service models. It attempts to fit individuals and groups within preconceived programming aims, content and delivery options, stemming from a preconceived understanding of the problem and the people facing it. Subsequent cosmetic adjustments to services are unlikely to result in progressive outcomes, where there is a mismatch between target group realities and programs offered.

This disconnect is illustrated in recent consumer research with Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, who expressed frustration with consultation activities initiated by health service providers.<sup>15</sup> Community members experience gaps between the services currently available, but are unable to raise these issues within the set consultation agendas determined by organisations. Instead of this, they want service providers to 'come to their table.'<sup>16</sup> They want to educate them about their own needs and the appropriate service solutions to match them.

The difference is in a shift in thinking, where service providers first consider what they can do to support target groups, rather than how familiar service models can be extended to service 'hard to reach' populations. Without starting with a question of need, providers can act to preserve entrenched processes and practices first, before serving people as a second priority. Conversely, co-design takes a ground-up approach. It begins with the intention of deeply understanding target group needs and realities, in order to conceive how organisations might play a role in promoting their wellbeing. This is approached by partnering with the people whose expertise derives from a firsthand experience of the problems tackled by public and community organisations.

Kylie Swartz, a grade three primary school teacher from Colorado in the United States, wanted to find out how she could better support her students who were predominantly experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Knowing that there was only so much she brought to her teaching from a broad understanding of the social problems they faced, she sought to go further to grasp their personal realities.

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13 Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, *Engaging marginalised and vulnerable families*, accessed from [http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/PB18\\_Vulnerable\\_families.pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/PB18_Vulnerable_families.pdf) on 30 April 2015; S Carbone, A Fraser, R Ramburuth & L Nelms, *Breaking Cycles, Building Futures: Promoting inclusion of vulnerable families in antenatal and universal early childhood services*, 2004, accessed from [https://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/beststart/ecs\\_breaking\\_cycles\\_best\\_start.pdf](https://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/beststart/ecs_breaking_cycles_best_start.pdf) on 15 May 2015.

14 N Brackertz, 'Who is hard to reach and why?', *ISR Working Paper*, 2007, accessed from <http://www.sisr.net/publications/0701brackertz.pdf> on 20 May 2015; op cit, Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne.

15 L Elkin, 'Breaking down barriers: the importance of Aboriginal consumer engagement', *Health Voices*, Consumers Health Forum of Australia, 2, 21–22, 2011.

16 *ibid*



*'As a new teacher, I struggled to understand the reality of my students' lives and how best to support them. I just felt like there was something I didn't know about my students.'*<sup>17</sup>

In a simple written exercise, she asked students to finish the statement, *"I wish my teacher knew..."*

They responded candidly:

*'I wish my teacher knew that my reading log is not signed because my mum is not around a lot.'*

*'I wish my teacher knew that I don't have pencils at home to do my homework.'*

*'I wish my teacher knew I got bullied on the bus and it made me feel sad.'*

*'I wish my teacher knew how much I miss my dad because he was deported to Mexico when I was three years old and I haven't seen him in six years.'*<sup>18</sup>

Children had the option of writing their names on their written piece or handing it in anonymously. Notably, they all decided to lay claim to their words, even going further to share their statements with their classmates. In one instance, a child openly stated that she did not have any friends to play with, inspiring another student to immediately put an arm around her in an offer of friendship. Students were able to empathise with each other and helped their teacher create a supportive classroom environment.

**"The story of Ms Swartz and her grade three students... is a clear example of co-design mentality which inspires practitioners to discern opportunities for co-design within their own practice, by starting with an open question of need and recognising the limits of professional assumptions."**

The *'I wish my teacher knew...'* exercise allowed students the agency to decide what they wanted to share from their lives and how much of it they wanted to reveal.<sup>19</sup> They determined the issues which were brought into focus and were free to frame them in a way which was meaningful to them. This freedom is characteristic of co-design practice. It respects individuals as partners in an initiative for change,

rather than treating them as passive research subjects, characteristic of traditional feedback methods. People are valued as active creators of knowledge, insight and design.

With the insight Ms Swartz gained from this simple exercise, she was able to consider how she could develop effective supports for her students' needs, and try them out in the classroom. Continuing to remain open and sensitive to student responses would enable her to refine her practice for promoting student wellbeing.

Co-design practice reflects more a *way of thinking* than it does a process. It can be done in a multitude of different ways, and therefore cannot be delineated in a concrete step-by-step process. This is because people, problems and contexts are always going to be variable; as will the organisations and practitioners who work with them. The story of Ms Swartz and her grade three students was published as a good-news story, and was not directly associated with co-design. However, it is a clear example of co-design mentality which inspires practitioners to discern opportunities for co-design within their own practice, by starting with an open question of need and recognising the limits of professional assumptions. The overarching aim is to create a system which is truly responsive to the people it intends to serve.

17 K Gander, "I wish my teacher knew...": Young students share their heartbreaking worries in notes', *The Independent*, 17 April 2015, accessed from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/i-wish-my-teacher-knew-young-students-share-their-heartbreaking-worries-in-notes-10185155.html> on 20 May 2015.

18 *ibid*

19 J Gumbrecht, '#Iwishmyteacherknew shares heartbreaks and hopes', *CNN*, 20 April 2015, accessed from <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/17/living/i-wish-my-teacher-knew-kyle-schwartz-schools-feat/> on 10 June 2015.

## PRACTICE IN FOCUS

# Empowerment approach to parent engagement

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand in Victoria worked with parents from low socio-economic backgrounds to help them create a support plan for their children's education. They recognised the importance of parental involvement in advancing educational outcomes but understood that school policy and procedures often create unintentional barriers to full engagement.

'True parent engagement is centred in the holistic needs of the children and their families, rather than the needs of the school.'

The initiative adapted an approach used in Bangladesh to empower communities in securing land rights. It ran for a total of nine hours, across three workshops (on separate days) that were designed with a creative focus.

In the first workshop, entitled **Visioning**, participants were asked to make paper representations of their children, including words reflecting their interests, strengths and abilities. They were then given a large piece of paper and asked to collaboratively paint a tree, with the roots representing Families, the trunk representing the School and the branches representing the Community.

Each participant wrote vision statements in response to the question 'What do we want for our children during their school years?' These were fashioned into paper fruit and leaves, and attached to the tree along with the paper representations of the children.

At the beginning of the workshop, participants were described as apprehensive, but this feeling quickly dissipated as they began to form relationships with other parents. By the end, they were surprised that the enjoyable exercise had resulted in such a holistic and complex vision for their children. They were also happy to find their concerns and desires were shared amongst the group.

In the second workshop, entitled **Planning**, participants collaboratively arranged their vision statements into their own categories. Statements had been presented on index cards and stuck up on the wall so that participants could easily see them, move them around and identify gaps. After coming up with additional points, they broke into smaller groups and drew pictures to represent the specific actions that Families, Schools and the Community needed to take in order to support each vision statement. They then shared their drawings with the larger group and identified any missing points. Ideas included *modelling positive relationships*, *training for community leaders* and *healthy eating initiatives*.

At the end of the workshop, participants expressed pride in their comprehensive action planning. Enthusiastic to secure the support of the School and Community, they drew up a list of key representatives to invite to their third workshop.



One participant expressed the experience of transformation through the project: 'It's important we get a new name, now that there are so many positive changes taking place. This community is like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly – and when that happens, the name changes too.'

In the final workshop, entitled **Advocating**, key representatives included politicians, a school principal and additional staff from Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand. A facilitator explained the outcomes from the previous workshops, prompting politicians to question parents directly about their ideas. This initially caused discomfort, with facilitators describing a '*distancing and confrontational*' mood in the room. Fortunately, facilitators had foreseen the risk of this meeting being intimidating for parents and had prepared an activity to offset the expected power imbalance within the group. In order to commit support for action points, everyone was asked to fashion origami birds, write their name on it, and stick it to their chosen action cards. With both parents and guests being equally unskilled in origami, the feeling in the room changed '*as participants worked together, and shared much laughter at the sometimes amateur results.*' As a result of this activity, representatives made tangible commitments to support action points and were also able to offer their own insights and ideas.

Over the course of these three workshops, facilitators remarked at the growing enthusiasm of participants who had become increasingly confident in their capacity to come up with great ideas and practically put them in motion.

Over the course of these three workshops, facilitators remarked at the growing enthusiasm of participants who had become increasingly confident in their capacity to come up with great ideas and practically put them in motion. The co-design approach allowed them the necessary space to explore their own change-making potential, rather than acting as passive subjects of the school's interventions.

When the workshops finished, participants were motivated to continue their work independently and planned to encourage more parents to join them. One participant expressed the experience of transformation through the project: '*It's important we get a new name, now that there are so many positive changes taking place. This community is like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly – and when that happens, the name changes too.*'

Source: S Maury, *Uplift: An empowerment approach to parent engagement in schools*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, 2014, accessed from [https://www.goodshepvic.org.au/Assets/Files/Uplift\\_report.pdf](https://www.goodshepvic.org.au/Assets/Files/Uplift_report.pdf) on May 20.

# Looking beyond vulnerability: Challenging professionalism and the way we work with people experiencing vulnerabilities

Co-design changes the way practitioners conceptualise and approach *vulnerability* in the pursuit of social change. In many cases, identifying someone as ‘vulnerable’ leads us to focus on their weaknesses and the need to protect them from possible harm. This intention is important and is rightly reflected in ethical protocols and guidelines for working with groups identified as vulnerable. However, an overemphasis on vulnerability may underestimate the degree to which people can determine visions for their own wellbeing and participate in decision-making processes.

The need to protect young people from further risk, and a concern for triggering adverse psychological reactions, can prevent decision-makers from deeply engaging with them about their worldview.

This point is largely canvassed in research concerning youth participation in policy and program development.<sup>20</sup> Young people occupy a precarious position in society, where they have reached a level of physical and cognitive maturity but do not enjoy the breadth of social freedoms afforded to adults.

These ‘inbetweeners’ are considered vulnerable due to their limited worldly experience, psychological development, predisposition for risk-taking behaviour and lack of material resources. The status is heightened when they are impacted by adverse circumstances or trauma, such as a natural disaster, mental health concern, or dysfunctional family environment. The need to protect young people from further risk, and a concern for triggering adverse psychological reactions, can prevent decision-makers from deeply engaging with them about their worldview.<sup>21</sup> This may result in policies or interventions being informed by broad risk factors, such as the common age a young person first uses an illicit substance, rather than contextual information, such as the immediate environment which conduces first use.<sup>22</sup>

20 K Daley, ‘The wrongs of protection: balancing protection and participation in research with marginalised young people’, *Journal of Sociology*, 51(2), 121–138, 2015; J Newman, ‘Protection through Participation: young people affected by forced migration and political crisis’, *RSC Working Paper No. 20*, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2005; B Head, “‘Why not ask them?’ Mapping and promoting youth participation”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 451–457, 2010.

21 *op cit.*, K Daley, 2015.

22 *ibid*

Focusing on vulnerability can also undermine resilience and capacities. Internationally, young people who have been affected by crises demonstrate a strong capacity for managing risk, employing coping strategies, and actively influencing their environment to direct personal outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Despite this, young people affected by war are often represented by aid agencies as helpless victims, leading to erroneous priorities in their support. For example, young people often choose to separate from their families in order to find employment or increase their chances of survival. Aid agencies, however, prioritise efforts to reunite families, creating a support gap for young people aiming to become self-sufficient.<sup>24</sup> It is important that young people, and other groups experiencing vulnerabilities, are able to speak for their own needs and values.

Many people who have experienced profound trauma and disadvantage have demonstrated significant resilience and skill which needs to be recognised and respected in engagement initiatives. This includes people who are homeless and use strategies to protect themselves on the streets, children who have taken on caring responsibilities, and individuals who endure chronic mental illness. Working from a dominant assumption of vulnerability,<sup>25</sup> rather than capacity, can underestimate the contribution people can make in offering insight,

sharing ideas and determining the best outcomes for their lives. In collaborative work, this can result in a paternalistic approach which constrains open communication, resulting in 'tokenistic' partnerships which reinforce the assumptions and ideas of professionals without giving critical weight to the insight of people impacted by social problems. Looking beyond vulnerability to see capacity is critical for working alongside people to promote positive change in co-design. It enables facilitators to remain open, responsive and respectful of their perspectives and living realities.

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23 *op cit.*, J Newman, 2005.

24 *ibid*

25 K Daley, The wrongs of protection: Balancing protection and participation in research with marginalised young people, *Journal of Sociology*, 51(2), 121–138, 2015.

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# Providing better support for Aboriginal families

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI), with the support of the South Australian Government, wanted to find out why family support services weren't working for Aboriginal families in the northern suburbs of Adelaide.<sup>26</sup> They began with the question, *'How can services enable sustainable change for Aboriginal families?'* To find the answer, they spent time with Aboriginal families as they went about their normal lives, doing the shopping, visiting the playground, and spending time in their homes. They recruited participants through service referrals, but they also wanted to talk to people who were not involved in existing programs. To do this, they set up a stall at the Playford Family Fun Day to meet new families. The team also spent time with staff from 15 different service providers in areas such as Child Protection and Home Visiting Programs.<sup>27</sup>

A major insight from this process was how the concept of *cultural appropriateness* had become a barrier for staff to having genuine and tough conversations with Aboriginal people, for fear they would say something that appeared racist or insensitive. This was described by one Aboriginal community member as 'tip-toeing around'<sup>28</sup> the real issues faced by families. Cultural appropriateness had also come to represent the expectation of lower service outcomes for Aboriginal families than for non-Aboriginal families. Staff were conscious of the long history of discrimination and injury experienced by Aboriginal people, which made progressive change feel 'too hard' or unrealistic. Though practitioners did not have ill intentions, their assumptions about their clients' vulnerability prevented them from asking questions and engaging with them in open dialogue. Staff also generalised broad lessons from 'Cultural Awareness Training Days' and were hesitant to talk directly to families about what culture meant to them. As a result, Aboriginal people were frustrated that they

were not being understood. They experienced and expressed culture in different ways and they wanted to see real change happen for their families.

Through their work, TACSI identified four shifts which needed to occur in order for services to create progress for Aboriginal families in the Playford area. Services needed to shift:

1. from being 'culturally appropriate' to being 'culturally adaptive,' where staff are flexible and responsive to what is important to different families
2. from expecting too little to expecting change, where staff are driven to see significant progress through their work
3. from seeing families as recipients of services to seeing families as a resource, where organisations support families' capacity to multiply change through their own social networks
4. from focusing on getting by to focusing on goals, where staff seek to understand unique family objectives and measure progress along the way.

This example demonstrates how co-design can help facilitators understand the root cause of discord and maladaptive practice, and discern barriers they unknowingly create for social change. The required shifts also reflect the change in organisational thinking that needs to occur for genuine support of ground-up solutions at an individual and community level.

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26 The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, *Enabling change with Aboriginal families and services*, 2013, accessed from <http://familybyfamily.org.au/2013/08/enabling-change-with-aboriginal-families-and-services/> on 29 April 2015.

27 *ibid*

28 *ibid*

"Lots of goonyans [non-Aboriginal people] are too scared. You've got to go in with a good heart. You've got to get to know people, get in there. Don't be too scared that you don't start. Be upfront. Make mistakes. Don't think you know everything. Be honest. That's showing respect."

– Margret, Aboriginal Community Worker<sup>30</sup>

It involves being responsive to different support or engagement needs in real time, optimistically envisioning change to drive the pursuit of better program solutions, and valuing people as change agents within their own environment. Critically, it also requires practitioners to reflect on how they conceptualise *vulnerability* for different groups, and the way this impacts communication to the detriment of service outcomes.

To make these identified shifts possible for service providers working with Aboriginal families in Adelaide, TACSI generated ideas for solutions through their own research and professional experiences. This included 'Culturally Adaptive Training', involving 'Reflective Practice Groups' which are widely used by Japanese manufacturing workers to think about what is working well, what is not, and how they can plan to try things differently. The technique has also been previously adapted by TACSI for teachers and nurses in a process called 'Care Reflect'. Using a similar tool may also help other organisations shift their approach for supporting responsive practice.

To build better relationships with families, a 'Get To Know You' toolkit was also suggested to facilitate open dialogue. This included the use of 'Culture Cards', depicting a range of broad concepts such as 'Going to Country', 'Indigenous Language', and 'Respecting History'. To use this tool, family members would select the cards they were drawn to and practitioners would use this as a starting point to discuss what these concepts meant to them and how they could be reflected in their support. Other inspirations included the 'Harvard Social Capital Building Toolkit,' for strengthening positive community networks and an 'Online Clearinghouse' to help practitioners share and find out about different practice methods used.<sup>29</sup>

Co-design involves challenging the way we approach *vulnerability*, and fostering a sense of curiosity which leads us to ask questions, to be open and honest, and to be deeply inquisitive about people's lives. Tension and miscommunication occur when we let our assumptions narrow or constrict our conversations. It inadvertently creates a professional-client divide, where the intention to 'protect' or avoid seemingly messy conversations amounts to patronisation.<sup>30</sup> Being tuned in and responsive to people in real time and allowing them agency within the engagement methods that we use will enable us to naturally sense where and how far we can go in our conversations. It will also allow us to pick up on valuable insights which go unsaid but which are reflected in peoples' '*doing*' and manner of response. The trick is not to speak or act from a place of 'knowingness'. We need to drop the idea that professionalism or expertise means getting it right straight away or knowing all the answers. If anything, this adds pressure to our relationships and stops people from exploring their own change-making capacities. An Aboriginal support worker engaged with TACSI described this well when she said, '*You've got to get to know people, get in there. Don't be too scared that you don't start. Be upfront, make mistakes. Don't think you know everything. Be honest, that's showing respect.*'<sup>31</sup>

29 The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, *Enabling change with Aboriginal families and services*, 2013, accessed from <http://familybyfamily.org.au/2013/08/enabling-change-with-aboriginal-families-and-services/> on April 29 2015.

30 *ibid*

31 *ibid*



## PRACTICE IN FOCUS

# Designing adaptive capacities for bushfire preparation

The 2009 Victorian ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires resulted in 173 people being killed and more than 2,000 homes destroyed. In response to this disaster, the government-funded Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre asked researchers at RMIT University to investigate critical problems in communicating risk to communities. The team worked with residents in the Southern Otways area of Victoria to understand how communication was occurring between authorities and residents, how social networks performed in preparedness, and what they could practically do to enable shared responsibility and adaptive capacity amongst residents.

Through household visits, field work and pilot engagement projects, the team discovered residents had developed learnt dependencies on authorities after years of an instructive ‘top-down’ approach to emergency management. They also realised their task to promote emergency responsiveness was not ‘*a simple process of engaging a coherent and motivated community.*’ Different residents experienced different levels of vulnerability to bushfire and their relationships with fire authorities were strained. The awareness of risk in relation to geographical environment also varied, and community networks were weak due to the movement of temporary residents in the area. Consequentially, community members were unmotivated to collectively act in a disaster situation and ‘*doubt, fear and confusion were rife.*’<sup>32</sup>

To facilitate community preparedness and empower local networks to respond effectively to emergencies from the ground-up, the team devised a co-design workshop focused on valuing and sharing local knowledge. In this sense, the task centred on designing improved adaptive capacity within communities rather than designing a program or service. Participants used ‘*Playful Triggers*’ like matchsticks, buttons and toy animals to represent potential risks and resources on a local map.

To facilitate community preparedness and empower local networks to respond effectively to emergencies from the ground-up, the team devised a co-design workshop focused on valuing and sharing local knowledge. In this sense, the task centred on designing improved adaptive capacity within communities rather than designing a program or service.

‘*What if*’ cards were also introduced to help participants think about different scenarios and how they could respond to minimise risk. Through this process, residents become naturally aware of the importance of strengthening community ties to improve resilience. They grew in their understandings about social network preparedness and became attuned to the ‘*complex issues and empathetic connections*’ within community. Participants also reached out to other residents who were not present at the workshops, in order to share information and extend valuable connections. With the success of this project, the Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI) now facilitates a four-day ‘*Community in Emergency Management*’ program using this methodology. The workshops spur ground-up emergency management protocols and prompt an organic awakening to community connectivity, vital for mitigating harm in natural disaster.

32 Y Akama, ‘Passing on, handing over, letting go – the passage of embodied design methods for disaster preparedness’, *Proceedings of the Fourth Service Design and Service Innovation Conference*, Lancaster, United Kingdom, 9–11 April 2014.



# Co-design: This is how it happens (or how it doesn't happen)

There is no step-by-step process for co-design. The methodology will vary in the same way that people, problems and organisations do. Often, instructional guidelines and tick box protocols are used to give us a sense of security. We feel safe in knowing that we can correctly follow procedure, that we can order our actions against a validated framework and that we can be accountable to where we are at in each stage of the process. It enables us to feel productive and in control as we take clear steps to work towards a desired outcome. In many areas of our life, this approach works well – when we're baking a cake, when we're assembling Ikea furniture, when we're operating complicated machinery. Here, each variable is constant, unchanging, predictable – as long as we use the right ingredients, follow the right instructions, push the right buttons, we will get where we need to go. Unfortunately (or very fortunately) our lives aren't like that. They're messy, non-linear, complex and often surprising.

The way we think isn't like that either. When we come up with an idea, we know that it hasn't arisen from a vacuum. There were innumerable elements and many unknown variables, in our minds and in our environment, which have played out and intersected to bring us to a moment of clarity or inspiration. How can we replicate this? Briefly speaking, we can't. An attempt to pin it down in a step-by-step process will likely miss out on the rich contextual information which cannot be captured in words or of which we are simply unaware. Nor will this richness be applicable or possibly manufactured in a different time, circumstance, and with different people. For this reason, co-design does not prescribe a 'how-to' methodology. Rather, it focuses on our mentalities as the primary tool for social change. IDEO, a not-for-profit organisation which designs solutions for poverty

alleviation, describes the phenomenon of social design through a set of *Mindsets and Design Spaces* (see below).<sup>33</sup>

## Mindsets

The seven *Mindsets* of social design are termed as:

- Embracing Ambiguity
- Empathy
- Creative Confidence
- Learning from Failure
- Iterate, Iterate, Iterate
- Optimism
- Make it.<sup>34</sup>

Practitioners will draw on some of these more than others within different projects and at different times of their work. They are not linked to a particular 'stage', but rather describe the way in which a co-design practitioner thinks, understands and responds throughout. These *Mindsets* can also emerge in the people we are designing with, as they join with practitioners in becoming *social designers* for change.

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33 IDEO, *The Field Guide to Human-Centred Design*, 2015, accessed from: <http://www.designkit.org/resources/1/> on May 20.

34 *ibid*

When we come up with an idea, we know that it hasn't arisen from a vacuum. There were innumerable elements and many unknown variables, in our minds and in our environment, which have played out and intersected to bring us to a moment of clarity or inspiration. How can we replicate this? Briefly speaking, we can't. An attempt to pin it down in a step-by-step process will likely miss out on the rich contextual information which cannot be captured in words or of which we are simply unaware.

In *Embracing Ambiguity*, social designers are comfortable with not knowing the answer to the problem they are trying to solve for a lot of the time. In fact, experiencing a sense of 'unknowingness' is embraced as a good thing for exploring a breadth of possibilities, beyond their initial understandings. It enables them to be sensitive to arising insights, and helps them to follow a trail of ideas they haven't quite figured out yet. Social designers don't work under the pressure of having to clarify their ideas or design outcomes straight away. Instead they are free to explore, to draw new understandings and to innovate.<sup>35</sup>

When social designers empathise, they seek to understand the world through the eyes of people affected by the social problems they are working to solve. Being tuned into their realities, perspectives and values guides practitioners through their decisions from moment to moment. It shapes their ideas and enables them to sense how they might support the creative potentials of people experiencing vulnerabilities. Through **Empathy**, social designers are responsive to people's challenges and sensitively discern opportunities for scaffolding their capacities in areas of growth, agency and innovation. Being *immersed* in people's lives and perspectives is at the heart of understanding social problems and coming up with the right ideas to solve them.<sup>36</sup>

**Creative Confidence** refers to the belief that everyone has the capacity to come up with bright ideas and constructively pursue them to make a social impact. This confidence helps social designers to start their work, to navigate adversity and to delve into the intricacies of a social problem. Believing that they can and will reach an optimum solution keeps social designers moving forward. When an idea doesn't quite work in actuality, they understand that this is not a reflection of their own capacity. Too often 'excellent practice' or accomplishment is associated with getting it right from the onset. We have unfortunately been socialised into believing that success is measured by a tick at every step of the way. This mentality stunts our confidence to try new things. It makes us afraid of making mistakes, even though getting it wrong can actually help us to evolve in our understandings<sup>37</sup> and move us closer to the right solution.<sup>38</sup> This leads us on the next Mindset.

33 IDEO, *The Field Guide to Human-Centred Design*, 2015, accessed from: <http://www.designkit.org/resources/1/> on May 20.

34 *ibid*

35 *ibid*

36 *ibid; op cit.*, Y Akama, 2014.

37 K Schulz, 'On being wrong', *TED Talks*, 2011, accessed from [http://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn\\_schulz\\_on\\_being\\_wrong](http://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_on_being_wrong) on 15 April 2015; K Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error: The Meaning of Error in the Age of Certainty*, Portobello Books, 2011.

38 *op cit.*, IDEO, 2015.

**Learning from Failure** acknowledges that social designers gain vital insight from failed ideas and approaches during design processes. It is about learning as much from what is not working, as from what is working. Failing early on, and often, enables social designers to test and refine their ideas before they are fully developed and implemented. In this way, social designers are not attached to ideas any longer than they need to be. When ideas fail, or when they don't get the right response, they are appreciated for the insight they have yielded and are easily discarded.<sup>39</sup>

**Iterate, Iterate, Iterate** means working closely with the people who are impacted by social problems and continuously checking in with them to test ideas, gauge their response to emerging possibilities, and absorb their insights. When a promising solution begins to make ground, social designers continue to iterate with people and fine-tune the smaller details. Throughout, they continue to remain open, empathetic and responsive, to avert the risk of simply rising to new assumptions.<sup>40</sup>

Optimism opens people up to possibility and enables them to see obstacles as a challenge that can be overcome, rather than a dead end. This is central to social progression.

Through **Optimism**, social designers believe that it is possible to make a significant impact in solving social problems by staying grounded in people's needs and realities. Optimism opens people up to possibility and enables them to see obstacles as a challenge that can be overcome, rather than a dead end. This is central to social progression. Without it, we can be bogged down with a sense of impossibility, or a tired feeling of overwhelming difficulty in making real change happen. Thinking from an optimistic mindset doesn't mean social designers don't discern obstacles, nor does it mean that they consider

change as an easy fix. Rather, a social designer's sensitivity to arising challenges necessitates a spirit of Optimism for driving through thorny situations. Across history, and in the smaller moments of our lives, social change has occurred because at least one person believed it was possible, sometimes when others did not.<sup>41</sup>

**Make it** involves getting ideas out into the world in a more tangible way. By making things, from paper crafts to brainstorm diagrams, role-plays, or sophisticated prototypes, ideas can be a meaningfully considered and shared. It allows people to *think through doing*, shaping the significance of an idea in the process of creating it. Being able to see and handle idea representations helps people to identify gaps or missing elements in an emerging possibility. It assists them in building on their thoughts and communicating them to others in order to get vital feedback. Symbols and images can quickly convey great depth, which can otherwise require a string of sentences to relay.<sup>42</sup>

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39 *op cit.*, IDEO, 2015.

40 *ibid*

41 *ibid*

42 *ibid*

## Co-design: This is how it happens (or how it doesn't happen) *continued*

### Design Spaces

We can understand co-design as occurring through three *Design Spaces* which will manifest in different ways, across different initiatives and with different people. These Spaces are called **Inspiration**, **Ideation**, and **Implementation**. They are not intended as neatly ordered or sequential 'stages.' Instead, practitioners and participants can work in more than one *Space* at the same time and move back and forth through *Spaces* as the process evolves.<sup>43</sup>

In the **Inspiration Space**, social designers seek to deeply understand the realities, perspectives and values of the people who are impacted by a problem, exploring their personal encounters with it on the ground. Working in this *Space* also involves discerning positive vehicles for change in people's lives and in their own capacities. It means paying attention, not only to what people *say* but what they *do* – how they respond and relate, how they think and how they create. Social designers can also draw on research to help them understand background context or speak to other professionals who can offer insights of their own. This may be people who have worked closely with a specific group, or experts who can provide specialist knowledge to help bring the feasibility of an idea to life. In all of this, social designers remain centred in the people they are working with and for, to create a solution for change.

In the **Ideation Space**, social designers bring together what they have learnt, share insights, identify emerging themes, and begin generating ideas for change. Thinking up lots of ideas, without worrying initially about their feasibility, can be an effective way to encourage a cognitive flow, streaming through to all different kinds of possibilities. What is key is that social designers draw their ideas from people and their living realities to shape their thinking in this

space. As the name would suggest, co-design involves ideating through moments of inspiration *with* people, constructing knowledge through collaborative visioning, and working through multiple perspectives to create a powerful solution.

It means paying attention, not only to what people say but what they do – how they respond and relate, how they think and how they create.

In the **Implementation Space**, social designers have refined a solution, and are ready to roll it out. This can involve seeking support from key stakeholders, building working partnerships, securing funding and organising the necessary resources. Whilst in this space, social designers continue to remain open to new insights, and may be drawn back into *Inspiration* and *Ideation Spaces* to continue refining the finer details of their solution.

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43 *ibid*

## Seeing Mindsets and Design Spaces work in practice

We can see Mindsets and Design Spaces working in practice through the examples of co-design we have already explored in this paper. To take a closer look, we will use Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand's initiative (see page 6–7) as an example.<sup>44</sup> This empowering approach is a good demonstration of how participants can work within *Design Spaces* to progressively transform their working mentalities, reflected in the social design *Mindsets*.

To get this initiative off the ground, facilitators first needed to **Embrace Ambiguity**. They were unaware how participants would work within this project and could not know what parents would come up with in developing a support plan for their children's education. Despite participants being identified as disengaged, facilitators **Optimistically** positioned them as creative change agents. They saw in them a capacity which parents had not yet seen in themselves, but of which they became progressively conscious through their co-design experience.

In the first workshop, participants worked within the **Inspiration Space** to explore their children's experiences in Family, School and Community learning spheres. They focused their thinking by **Making** paper representations of each child, reflecting their essential characteristics in the symbolic figures. They also made a painted paper tree, with different parts of it representing the Family, School and Community spheres. On this, they attached the paper representations of the children, as well as their vision statements, expressing their desires for their learning and wellbeing. When looking at the image they created, parents could see and therefore naturally *sense* the interconnected nature of each learning sphere. They delighted in the complexity of their visioning which formed a tangible vision for their children's future, and which could be easily seen, understood and reflected upon. Their initial apprehension dissolved as they become increasingly **Optimistic** in the bright possibilities that emerged. This formed a strong foundation for their second workshop in the **Ideation Space**.

Despite participants being identified as disengaged, facilitators Optimistically positioned them as creative change agents. They saw in them a capacity which parents had not yet seen in themselves, but of which they became progressively conscious through their co-design experience.

In the **Ideation Space**, parents continued to think through **Making**, drawing their ideas for practical action points to support each vision statement. These drawings became the focus of discussions as they shared their ideas and added additional points to address identified gaps. As parent participants worked through their own capacities for constructive **Ideation**, their **Creative Confidence** developed. They expressed pride in their ideas and were enthusiastic to share them with authority figures so that their planning could be put in motion. Facilitators were keen for this to occur as well, but through **Empathy** they understood that this may be intimidating for parents. They therefore devised another **Making** activity to engage parents and authority representatives on a relatively equal footing. This occurred within the **Implementation Space**, where everyone was required to make origami paper birds and attach them to action point cards to demonstrate their committed support. Representatives who offered their own ideas and insights also drew the group in an **Ideation Space** where possibilities continued to the expanded and refined. By the end of the final workshop, parents felt empowered to continue their work independently, demonstrating their acquired **Creative Confidence** for social design.

44 S Maury, Uplift: *An empowerment approach to parent engagement in schools*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, 2014, accessed from [https://www.goodshepvic.org.au/Assets/Files/Uplift\\_report.pdf](https://www.goodshepvic.org.au/Assets/Files/Uplift_report.pdf) on 20 May 2015.



## Supporting struggling families to thrive

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) was asked by the South Australian Government to create a service solution to help reduce the number of families needing to work with Child Protection Services. Carolyn Curtis was seconded from the state's Child Protection system to work on this project. She describes her motivation below:

**'Being a passionate child protection worker, I was really interested in what else can we do for families, because clearly what we're doing now isn't enough, whether that be services, targeted services, community development, mentoring... It's not enough, because we still have child protection stats that are increasing every year.'**<sup>45</sup>

Over the course of a few months, the team spoke with more than 100 families and spent time with 35 of them in their homes. Initially, they asked families whether they *'could talk to them about cutting out stress?'* This question didn't get a good response, with laughter being a common reaction. Taking this as a necessary insight, the team sought to understand the reason why. What they learnt was that cutting out stress altogether wasn't considered an option for families. Instead, families who were thriving were able to balance the type and level of stress they experienced in their lives.<sup>46</sup>

The team went on to identify the main stressors experienced by families, and how thriving and struggling families differed in their capacities to balance stress. As well as openly listening to what families were telling them, they also paid attention to the language families used when talking about stress and their desires, in order to yield further insights.

The team went on to identify the main stressors experienced by families, and how thriving and struggling families differed in their capacities to balance stress. As well as openly listening to what families were telling them, they also paid attention to the language families used when talking about stress and their desires, in order to yield further insights. They learnt about the kind of support networks families had, what support networks were attractive to them, what was most important to different families, where they wanted to see themselves in a few years time, and how they felt they could get there.<sup>47</sup>

45 The Australian Centre for Innovation, *A year in the life of Family by Family*, 2013, accessed from <https://vimeo.com/50653317> on 30 April 2015.

46 C Lockett, S Schulman & C Vanstone, *Going for the good life*, The Australian Centre for Innovation, 2010, accessed from <http://familybyfamily.org.au/2010/08/going-for-the-good-life/> on 30 April 2015.

47 *ibid*



'Being a passionate child protection worker, I was really interested in what else can we do for families, because clearly what we're doing now isn't enough, whether that be services, targeted services, community development, mentoring... It's not enough, because we still have child protection stats that are increasing every year.' – Carolyn Curtis.<sup>45</sup>

The team shared stories with each other about their engagements with different families and collectively explored emerging insights. As a result, they identified 'thriving behaviours' which were typical of families who were doing well, and tried to find existing programs which helped to develop these. When they couldn't find an appropriate model, they began to generate their own ideas for a program solution. During this process, the team went back to families to gain further insights, share ideas, and start shaping program possibilities with them. As a solution began to emerge through their work, the team continued to refine their working model with families and prototyped different change tools to support family progress. They also piloted the program model with families before officially rolling it out.<sup>48</sup>

The program they designed is called *Family by Family*. Here, families who are struggling link up with thriving families who have experienced tough times and have made it through. Thriving families receive training through camps and workshops to build on their strengths and all families are supported by a local Family Coach throughout their link-ups. A personalised *Change Tool* is used to help families develop their own goals and assess their progress as they go.<sup>49</sup>

The effectiveness of *Family by Family* was demonstrated in an independent evaluation, which suggested positive change was created by:

- increasing choice and control
- strengthening relationships between children and parents
- behaviour modelling
- goal setting
- accountability and reflection

- increasing reciprocity
- increasing practical assistance.<sup>50</sup>

*Family by Family* was initially designed and rolled out in Marion in South Australia<sup>51</sup> and has now been adapted in other areas, including Playford (South Australia)<sup>52</sup> and Mt Druitt (New South Wales).<sup>53</sup>

48 *op cit.*, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, 2013.

49 The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, *Family by Family explained for professionals*, 2011, accessed from <http://familybyfamily.org.au/2011/09/family-by-family-for-professionals/> on 1 May 2015.

50 Community Matters: *Family by Family Evaluation Report 2011–12*, accessed from <http://www.tacsi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/TACSI-FbyF-Evaluation-Report-2012.pdf> on 1 May 2015.

51 The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, *Creating Family by Family*, 2010, accessed from <http://familybyfamily.org.au/2010/09/creating-family-by-family/> on 10 June 2015.

52 The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, *Playford scoping and start-up Report*, 2012, accessed from <http://familybyfamily.org.au/2012/04/playford-scoping-report/> on 10 June 2015.

53 The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, *Mt Druitt scoping and start-up Report*, 2011, accessed from <http://familybyfamily.org.au/2014/05/mt-druitt-scoping-report/> on 10 June 2015.

## PRACTICE IN FOCUS

# 'Hatching' ideas, plans and a Go Goldfields community

Go Goldfields is an alliance of organisations that have come together to apply a place-based approach to complex social problems that are impacting on the Central Goldfields community.

Since its launch over three years ago, it has seen great progress, including a 33 per cent reduction in the rate of children entering primary school in the region who require speech/language intervention. But there is much work to do, with the area still experiencing the highest rates of unemployment in Victoria for families with children under 15 and low levels of engagement in work or study for young people aged 13–17 years.

Working together with the community and being with it for the long haul has been at the heart of the Go Goldfields approach from the beginning, but the alliance has stepped up its engagement through the ongoing HATCH consultations to co-design its work plan for 2015–17.

Working together with the community and being with it for the long haul has been at the heart of the Go Goldfields approach from the beginning.

It followed a recognition that while the first years of Go Goldfields involved wide consultations with the community, decision making was left to service leaders and decision makers. That was not seen as necessarily a bad thing at the time. Unlike other place-based projects that emerge from a groundswell for action out of community trauma or other disruption, Go Goldfields was initially led by a small group of passionate community leaders who recognised the need for systemic change, and had to work to generate support and passion in the community.

However, it was clear in recent times that community sentiment had shifted, that Go Goldfields staff were engaging very closely with vulnerable community members, and that in some areas – such as family violence support – community and government services were running a little behind the community. For example, it was the local Rotary club that drove the introduction of men's behaviour change programs in the region and a focus on holding men responsible and accountable for behaviour. Local support services had still been very focused on providing support and refuge for women – also critical work, but the services now acknowledge that Rotary's engagement and focus 'changed the conversation' on family violence in the community for the better.

As a result, Go Goldfields resolved to change the way it made decisions when it came to planning its next few years of work, to bring people from the community and business into the design process.

The co-design process began before the first formal collaborations – with as much thought and energy going into designing the collaborations, as the act of collaboration needed itself.

The key questions being asked in HATCH are: What's our shared outcome and, if we get it right, what will it look like in the community? What do services need to do, what do decision makers need to do, what does the community need to do? The message is that 'everyone has a job to do together'.

It set about establishing a Collaborative Table of 20 people including community members with lived experience, business and community leaders, service leaders and decision makers, coming together to develop and monitor strategies to deliver on Desired Community Outcomes.

Out of that will come Action Groups based on priority action areas of Children and Families, addressing Family Violence, and Youth and Workforce Development, which will mirror the structure of the Collaborative Table, with community members likely to be impacted by the strategies being at the table and supporting the decision making process. Literacy and the arts are also to be embedded across these key focus areas.

The co-design process began before the first formal collaborations – with as much thought and energy going into designing the collaborations, as the act of collaboration needed itself. Community members

were asked to help design the conversation from the beginning: they 'tested' the language and concepts of Go Goldfields to see if they understood them in the way they were being intended, they advised on the best venue and time of day to hold consultations, and workshopped what to call the co-design process. Out of that emerged the HATCH co-design project – for 'hatching ideas, hatching plans, hatching a community'.

Its approach was borne of a sense that many community engagement frameworks come out of the business sector and are too linear for meaningful social change and often require high levels of literacy and education to participate.

HATCH is informed by the Collective Impact ecological approach of the Tamarack Institute in Canada, and inspired by the strengths based community work, co-design and collective impact approach of initiatives like The Hive, which aims to create a new way for residents in Mt Druitt, in Sydney's western suburbs, to work with others from across different organisations, including local services, government agencies and businesses, to make change happen locally.

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## Practice in focus: 'Hatching' ideas, plans and a Go Goldfields community *continued*

While the process is still in its early days, there is a sense that the emerging objectives are being made 'more specific, more targeted and more real' and with 'less jargon, fewer weasel words' through 'walking alongside' the community members in the planning process. Examples include:

- Language and literacy: our community has language and literacy skills to support aspiration and create life opportunities.
- Children: our community grows and nurtures happy, healthy and creatively engaged children.
- Parenting: parents are confident, nurturing and positive role models for their children.
- Youth: young people are confident and active community members who all strive to reach their full potential.
- Workforce development: everyone can learn, earn and achieve within a community that believes in and supports opportunities.

What is particularly reassuring for the Alliance is the level of engagement that HATCH is having with community members who would normally be seen as 'hard to reach'. One telling moment was having a community leader express concern at one forum that there were no community members present. Yes there are, the organisers reassured, pointing to representatives on a range of tables, from young people just out of school through to a woman who had just become both a new mum and a grandmother. 'But I don't know any of them,' the community leader said.

What is particularly reassuring for the Alliance is the level of engagement that HATCH is having with community members who would normally be seen as 'hard to reach'.

'That's because they are not the people we usually get, not the people who normally would respond to an advertisement to join a consultation,' explained Go Goldfields general manager Sharon Fraser. 'Some of the community members we are engaging with have likely never been at a community meeting before in their lives.'

For Go Goldfields, the key message is: to make co-design work, you have to want to share the power. Often in this space either the community does not get a voice or it is given total control. Everybody has to be bringing their best selves to the table to make the changes that need to be made.

## Challenges and moving forward

There are undoubtedly a number of challenges service practitioners face to embrace co-design in their work. Entrenched structures, systems and practices within organisations often do not facilitate innovative activity. Traditional top-down hierarchies can pose an obstacle to the emergence of ground-up solutions and organisational cultural change can sometimes be painstakingly slow. Without managerial support and flexible systems to accommodate co-design, it is difficult to get larger projects off the ground. Current contracting relationships between government and community agencies can also hinder the capacity of organisations to innovate. This is not, however, a reason to give up. One idea which has been suggested is to consider creating a *Innovation Lab*<sup>54</sup> within an organisation, as a free space for thought and ideas about possible projects. Projects could start small, in order to build support and confidence amongst peers and authorities. This is only one idea, and the best approach for organisational change depends on the organisation itself. We can consider these problems through a social design lens, described in the seven *Mindsets* explored in this paper.

Current contracting relationships between government and community agencies can also hinder the capacity of organisations to innovate. This is not, however, a reason to give up.

The key tools for social change are our own minds and our own thinking. Sometimes, we speak about service systems and structures as though they have a life of their own. In fact, they function of and through us.

The key tools for social change are our own minds and our own thinking. Sometimes, we speak about service systems and structures as though they have a life of their own. In fact, they function of and through us. Power is a central tenant in this. Those who have and give power to existing systems may not be motivated to enable change because it involves letting go<sup>55</sup> and creating uncertainty around their own value or positioning within this new uncharted space. It may be tempting to think about this problem in relation to managerial figures alone. But this consideration of power also relates to practitioners closer to the ground. Co-design involves transferring and sharing power with people who are impacted by social problems. Not understanding how to *be* in this new space can be uncomfortable or daunting.

54 H V Carstensen & C Bason, 'Powering collaborative policy innovation: can Innovation Labs help?', *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, vol 17(1), 2012.

55 op. cit., Y Akama, 2014.

## Challenges and moving forward *continued*

Traditional systems enable us to inherit clearly defined roles, protocols and accountabilities. We act within these to inform our actions, to justify our decisions, and to maintain a level predictability in service interactions. Predictability is safe – it can be planned for, measured and panned out in organisational action plans which enable us to feel prepared and ahead of the game. Unfortunately, this can give us a false sense of order which simply does not exist in the real social world. If we try to impose one organising framework on social issues, and the way we deal with them, we can be prevented from looking beyond this framework to respond to real people and real problems in all their complexity. Co-design essentially corresponds with *people over process*. What is critical here is that we don't reduce our engagement with others to a set of structured methodologies.<sup>56</sup> These are used as tools to support people and their creative potentials and are exercised insofar as they serve this purpose.

Knowing how to *be* in this new ambiguous space, and what particular role practitioners will take at different times, will be gauged through responsive practice. This sensitivity is a natural human *sense* that can remain untapped in professional work because of our reliance on organising frameworks. This is not to say that practitioners will be expected to immediately become *all-intuitive* collaborators. It is a *sense* which

Co-design essentially corresponds with people over process. What is critical here is that we don't reduce our engagement with others to a set of structured methodologies.

evolves in practice. This can be summed up in the words of one practised facilitator of co-design, who describes her experience in her work over time:

**'I have developed the ability to be more open, to listen more actively, to attune to different viewpoints and surrender expectation. To directly experience how hard it is to be challenged, grow and transform also means one gains the ability to build greater empathy for others who are also engaging in this process of transformation too.'**<sup>57</sup>

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56 Y Akama & A Prendiville, 'Embodying, enacting and entangling design: A phenomenological view to co-designing services', *Swedish Design Research Journal*, 13(1), 29–40, 2013.

57 *op cit.*, Y Akama, 2014.





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