

RESILIENT COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS FOR RESILIENT COMMUNITIES/REGIONS: A CASE OF CHARTERS TOWERS NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE INC.

FACT SHEET



INTRODUCTION

Government agencies, businesses, and community organisations are expected or challenged to deliver quality of life and opportunity to regional areas at parity with that experienced in capital cities. At the same time, federal and state governments are also facing fiscal and political pressures in order to balance the budget and are increasingly cutting back on ‘welfare’ and social support expenditure at a time when the needs of regional communities have been actually rising. For instance, the Queensland Government has announced that the funding to neighbourhood and community centres will be reduced by 10% for the centres that receive more than \$90,000 per annum, and that community development funding will be discontinued completely. In addition, additional efficiency measures have been introduced i.e. the required efficiency dividend of nearly 4% is applied to all social inclusion grant recipients in Queensland. While such government downsizing and wider cost savings under the broad banner of austerity measures have had adverse implications, not only on service delivery but also on the very resilience of community sector organisations, **there is a need to leverage the strengths of the sector to respond to operational changes and challenges and be resilient.** It is in this context of austerity/resilience that this fact sheet aims to explore the characteristics, contributions, and challenges of the Charters Towers Neighbourhood Centre Inc. (CTNC) and outline a way forward.

PROJECT TEAM

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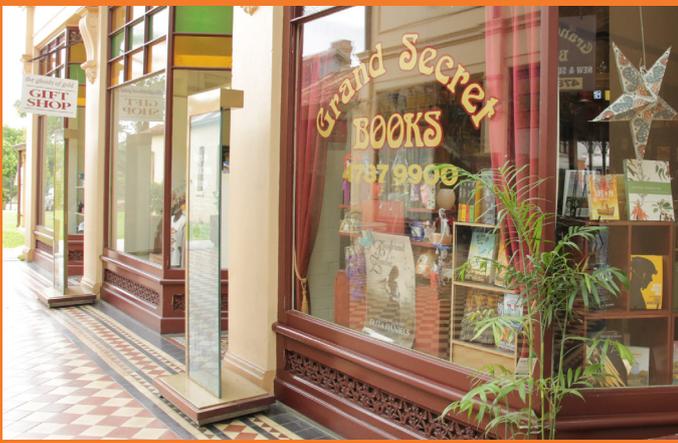
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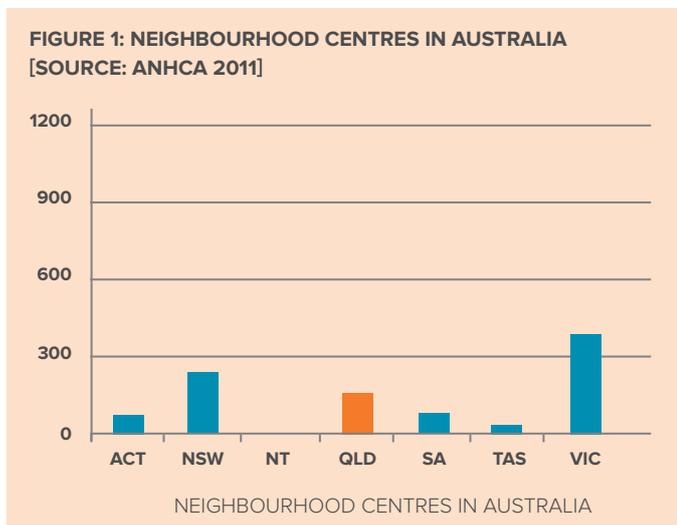
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BACKGROUND

NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES

Although neighbourhood centres existed in Australia in the 1960s they strengthened in the 1970s to respond to the needs of the general community, e.g. adult learning, community development, and the needs of children and women. Neighbourhood centres are typically small, not-for-profit organisations that utilise a socially inclusive community development approach to the delivery and provision of services and activities for marginalised people in local communities. There are over 1,000 centres across Australia which employ nearly 15,000 staff and over 20,000 volunteers (Figure 1).



CHARTERS TOWERS NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE INC. (CTNC)

The Charters Towers Neighbourhood Centre Inc. (CTNC) was established in 1986 when a group of concerned citizens came together to tackle issues around access to low-cost housing. The group was named the Charters Towers Community Welfare Association (CTCWA) and incorporated in July 1987. In 2000 CTCWA changed its name to the Charters Towers Neighbourhood Centre Inc. to better reflect its community development goals.

As it has developed over time, the centre has become a key community asset with a purpose to provide an attractive, comfortable, non-judgmental environment where its clients can access information, referral services, resources and support.

The services provided by CTNC, utilising local knowledge and experience, service delivery expertise and coupled with the passion and compassion of the staff, in aggregate are a valuable community asset. The centre is strategically located in the community and its foci and resources can be quickly mobilised, expanded and/or readjusted when there is a need to respond to local needs, emerging issues or opportunities due to strong linkages with the local people, not only in the town of Charters Towers but also in the entire region covering about 70,000 square kilometres—equivalent to the size of the State of Tasmania,

CTNC delivers services primarily to the regional areas in and around Charters Towers in the following 11 different areas of social services:

1. Community Support Program
2. Disability Support Program
3. Family Support Program
4. Community Housing Program
5. Court Support Program
6. Emergency Relief Program
7. Parents and Community Engagement Program
8. Personal Helpers and Mentors Program
9. Carer Respite Program
10. Group Home
11. Rural Multi-Tenant Service Centre



Two main community impacts of CTNC have been distilled as follows:

EMERGENCY SHELTER FOR WOMEN: CTNC has catered for the dire needs of clients that are either homeless or are victims of domestic violence. One of the interviewees said:

“There is no emergency housing in Charters Towers apart from a men’s night shelter—Indigenous men’s night shelter. This is one of the areas, we’ve had people—domestic violence victims—who go back home because there’s nowhere to go. There’s no emergency accommodation, there’s no women’s shelter, there’s none of that.”

PICKING UP THE PIECES LARGER SERVICE

PROVIDERS LEFT BEHIND: Most of the larger service providers are based in Townsville and operate under the ‘drive in drive out’ model. On the contrary, CTNC is a permanent community asset that clients can always count and rely on. One of the interviewees said:

“You have people on the ground and it’s reliable. There have been so many ‘drive in drive out’ services that are so unreliable. They’ve got three clients booked in a day because that’s a full day for them by the time they drive in and drive out. Then one of those clients cancels they just don’t show up [and the clients have no one to rely on but us].”

CHALLENGES

The current volatile funding environment, characterised by decreased government grants, amplified competition for grants between agencies and increased accountability, is a primary challenge for the centre.

For instance, the Queensland Government withdrew funding for one of the major ongoing programs of CTNC—the Healthy Lifestyle Program (HLP)—in 2012. The program had commenced in 2008 and CTNC was receiving nearly \$350,000 per year in order to provide a broad range of nutrition and health-related services to the community. Consequently, the downsizing also meant that three staff associated with the HLP (Advanced Healthcare Worker, Community Nutritionist and a Community Education Officer) had to be axed. Since nearly 15% of the entire town population had registered with the HLP and demonstrated tangible behavioural change outcomes the axing of the program has reduced opportunities for social and physical participation of local residents.

A WAY FORWARD

Neighbourhood centres can’t be expected to anticipate and respond to all of the surprising and non-linear ways in which socio-political systems behave. When the existing modus operandi becomes challenging (e.g. current ‘funding models’ are no longer germane) new or innovative operational models are needed to overcome the operational limitations and build a level of resilience into the organisational system. While factors relevant to the resilience of CTNC were unknown at the outset, CTNC was interested in critically examining the way it does what it does and research/experiment in order to become resilient. With the help of a research partner like SCU, CTNC aims to adapt to change and is willing to explore the following as a way forward:

1. **New Business Models not Funding Models**
2. **Better Articulation of Value Propositions**
3. **Effectively Capturing Social Impacts**
4. **Being In-tune with Policy Focus.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project is supported through the Australian Government’s Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program.

IMAGES

All photographs by Subas Dhakal.

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

Dhakal, S. P. and Keast, R. (2014) *Resilient Community Organisations for Resilient Communities/Regions: A Case of Charters Towers Neighbourhood Centre Inc. Research Report*. Gold Coast: Southern Cross Business School.