



SHREDDING THE EVIDENCE:  
WHOSE COLLECTIVE IMPACT  
ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

A Community Cultural Development  
Critique of Beyond Empathy's Maven Project

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## INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable hype and fanfare in Australia recently accompanying the North American-informed Collective Impact (CI) approach and its claims to deliver real transformative social change for individuals and communities. CI actively promotes its principal incentive and distinctive trait, namely to concentrate the energies of its collaborators to achieve real, long-term, measureable and sustainable outcomes, oft quoted as a Social Return on Investment (SROI). Not coincidentally, the rise of CI's visibility has emerged alongside rapidly diminishing public funding for social change initiatives, with a corresponding and somewhat belated turn to the philanthropic sector to partially meet this funding shortfall. Early signs across Australia indicate that philanthropic funds are no less driven by a 'value for money' imperative that has left many lamenting the shift in community organisations working to satisfy donor expectations rather than working with and for local communities.

In this context, some serious questions have already been raised about the Collective Impact approach and ambition, particularly how CI can meaningfully engage with long-term disadvantaged local communities and realistically agree on what successful outcomes would look like for such communities. Community cultural development (CCD) would seem to offer a useful counterpoint to the CI approach with its enduring emphasis on authentic process and bottom-up solutions but CCD too has received its own share of criticism for an obsession with process to the exclusion of real and tangible social outcomes. Whatever approach's claims are to be tested, this paper starts from the standpoint that their veracity will only be significant if they can actually show they're making a difference in Australia's most disadvantaged communities and populations.

The Maven Project of the community arts organisation *Beyond Empathy* (BE) in regional Northern NSW is a three-year project that builds an Aboriginal community arts and cultural development hub using a process which first engages, then works collaboratively on planning and creatively developing. The genuine CCD process that Maven engages in is already producing demonstrable outcomes but not those that are traditionally valued and counted in social change initiatives. Focusing on Maven and BE, this paper sets out to challenge all those who purport to support outcome-oriented social change approaches to more thoroughly assess the process by which outcome measures are proposed and then agreed upon. It thus seeks to demonstrate the fundamental connection between CCD and social change outcomes and measurement, a connection that would seem to be somewhat tangential for many purveyors of Collective Impact. Furthermore, it also seeks to challenge those seeking to revive CCD approaches to not only engage in but develop a more sophisticated outcomes and measurement vocabulary, and help turn around the perception that CCD is disinterested in quantification of outcomes.

# BEYOND EMPATHY

Beyond Empathy (BE) is a community, arts and cultural development organisation that “uses the arts to influence change in the lives of individuals and communities experiencing recurring hardship”. It works in regional areas across Australia seeking to break cycles of disadvantage and help individuals to develop new skills.

Beyond Empathy’s stated purpose is to:

- Use art to influence real change and enhance the wellbeing of the lives of marginalized individuals and communities.
- Give the most disadvantaged people in society opportunities to participate in, and create vibrant, innovative and culturally ambitious works of art.
- Create extraordinary art and through that, develop the skills and tools people and communities need (confidence, reliance, self-worth, self-knowledge) to succeed beyond anyone’s expectations.
- Generate new connections and new opportunities overriding disengagement and disadvantage.
- Go further than any other organisation, to places no one else goes; delving into situations no one else will touch; reaching people no one else can reach; collaborating with everyone, rejecting no one.

BE’s diverse history of ccd is well recognised for achieving positive relationships, and results with marginalised communities, particularly regional and remote aboriginal communities. BE operates with a strengths-based approach and the overarching principle of partnership over paternalism; and, participation over theory. Emerging artists across all art forms are provided an opportunity to build capacity, foster experimentation and develop original work in collaboration with professional artists. For some of BE’s participants, this process has lead to sustainable employment. The Maven project alone created 15 arts employment opportunities, allowing for ongoing employment pathways, while 63 emerging artist dance, music, song, poetry/written word, production, photography, intensive workshops were held with 12 emerging artists. More recently, BE has engaged external evaluation consultants in some of its larger projects where initial results demonstrate measurable health and social improvements, particularly a SRoI study conducted by NetBalance of BE’s *Rites of Passage* film project that showed for each dollar invested, a social return of three times that amount was delivered through improved emotional well-being, increased self-esteem, improved prospect of meaningful employment, improved outlook for the future, increased social inclusion & improvement in personal relationships.

This focus on impact is articulated by BE as aiming “to create a benchmark model for measuring our social impact and mirroring our CCD leadership” through implementing an “arts led social impact strategy” based on a Logic model /approach, alongside other measurement concepts. The rationale is that “[l]ogic models are a logical or systematic way to articulate and share understanding about the relationship between what is invested (money, people, expertise) + activities (what we do) + outputs (people served, things created) + outcomes (changes that happened in people or community) resulting in IMPACT – long terms changes in people, policy or practice directly attributable to Beyond Empathy’s work”.

Perhaps as equally significant as BE’s ten principles (<http://10principles.be.org.au/>) guiding its work with community, is BE’s stated eight values guiding its *social impact measurement*, namely:

- Take responsibility for impact and encourage others to do so too
- Focus on our purpose
- Involve others in our impact practice
- Apply proportionate and appropriate methods and resources
- Consider the full range of the difference we make: positive and negative, planned and unplanned
- Be honest and open
- Be willing to change and act on what we find
- Actively share our impact plans, methods, findings and learning

Furthermore, BE measures its artistic vibrancy against six parameters:

- Reflection – did it move you?
- Aesthetic merit – was it well put together and was the art product of a high standard?
- Delivery - was it well put together and well presented?
- Experience – did it introduce you to new experiences or opportunities, things you’ve not encountered before?
- Insight – did it introduce you to new thoughts, did you learn new things?
- Reflection – did you think about people differently?

There is plentiful evidence that BE has ‘walked the talk’ in terms of applying these principles and parameters in its groundbreaking Maven project. As an umbrella for a number of specific initiatives – including 3Moree, Catharsis, Festival of the Brolga and Festival of the Brave, and emerging artists’ intensives – Maven has demanded that all the principles and values underpinning its delivery have been strongly tested.

## MAVEN

The Maven Project is a three-year project commencing in 2014 that builds an Aboriginal community arts and cultural development hub in Armidale, NSW. The Maven project uses a process which first engages, then works collaboratively on planning and creatively developing. The process is always about gathering together as a collective. Aboriginal autonomy and ownership sits at the centre of the Maven Project. Part of the need for the Project is the ongoing socio-economic disadvantage that characterises the area with Armidale, Moree and the surrounding region of north-west NSW having lower levels of income and higher levels of unemployment than the national average. The region has below average educational participation and incomes and a large Aboriginal population comprising 5.8% of Armidale's population and 22.8% of Moree's population, compared with the state average of 1.9% (about 10% of the NSW Aboriginal population live in the region), and they experience unemployment rates as high as 46%.

Educational disadvantage is higher in the region with 69.6% of women and 61.4% of men having no skilled post-school qualifications (compared with State averages of 65.2% and 53%). The weekly income for a single person is 17% below the national figure and the weekly income for a household is 21% below the national figure. The percentage of one-parent families in the region is 20.3%, which is over 30% higher than the national average of 15.5%.

With low levels of educational attainment and high unemployment rates, the Aboriginal young people in North-West NSW require projects that engage them with the community on several levels – with their culture, with elders, with local support services and with different skills training not solely reliant on the traditional manual trades qualifications. Proposed projects must recognise Aboriginal young people's strong connection to culture and their inherent talent in the arts.

The Maven Project respects the deep cultural cycle of life-long learning and teaching that guide Aboriginal communities and recognises that Aboriginal people have all they need to teach and guide their young people and their communities to artistic and cultural independence. Unique to Maven is the creation of enabling spaces for Aboriginal people and artists to take the lead with their skills, with support and backing from BE building their leadership in a sound and supportive cultural context where they set the rules of engagement. By continually adapting and moulding projects around them and their skills, each experience cascades into the next, but only when they are ready. Such a process sometimes jars with Collective Impact approaches reliant on large systems where partners can rarely be this flexible, most notably education, bound by timetables and rigid rules that mitigate risk and disruption, in direct contrast to BE's belief that it is in the chaos that learning occurs and creativity develops.

Also partners can only evaluate from their own frame of reference. BE purposely lets community establish these parameters. BE also makes sure it gets on and does actual activities because Aboriginal people need to experience it to take the next step, to trust the process and know what it is they are involved in. CI's advocacy for lengthy preliminary planning periods would lose people if BE was to employ this model.

*Mavens are intense gatherers of information and impressions and so recognise that art and narrative sits at the centre of all teaching and learning. Driving the Maven Project are the Aboriginal teachers, mentors and cultural guides necessary to take their community into the next millennium. Mavens are information-hoarders and information brokers, sharing and trading what they know.*

The Maven Project sought to create a hub for creativity, imagination, collaboration, learning, skills, cultural exchange and community development in Armidale, NSW using the development of two major cross-artform performance works and the exceptional artistic and cultural talents of professional Aboriginal artists as the platform to grow the creative hub. Working as artistic leaders and teachers, they used the opportunity to participate in two annual major cross-artform performance works to unlock the potential of young emerging Aboriginal artists from across regional NSW who have untapped strengths. Maven placed Aboriginal artists at the centre of the creation of a major artistic work with their community about their community. It is a hallmark of the project's approach to give Aboriginal people full custodianship over their intellectual property, to be in charge of how their work is created and how they present it to the broader community.

Such a committed approach can have significant implications and most certainly did in Armidale where Maven's institutional partners found it very difficult to relinquish this custodianship over creative intellectual property when the "crunch" of performance time arrived. While a collaborative approach had certainly acknowledged the input of these institutional partners in co-creating performance spaces, ultimately a lack of genuine support for the performers themselves and the intent of the final community outcome resulted in poor audience numbers at the annual event and in turn, saw Maven take the lion's share of the blame as the visible performers being assessed against perceived outcomes. For BE's Executive Director, a CI approach "means for us that there are too many variables to control and too many things can go wrong at the last minute and ultimately, that's bad for the participants – who need to benefit most from the big-bang final outcome. Then the creative team is judged rather than the systems people because people expect artists to be unwieldy but the truth is they have greater pride in their work than any other professional".

The Maven project also placed young people at the centre of its activity, recognising that they are the future and sustainability of Aboriginal communities

wanting to be valued and seen as contributors to their community, but needing new opportunities to prove themselves. Now in its third year, *No Shame Day* - showcasing remarkable and inspiring performances by young people sharing positive youth culture, reflecting on personal experiences, and creating performance works that acknowledge their capacity to influence their future – has been championed by BE as precisely one of these new opportunities. A similar motivation underpinned photographer Raphaella Rosella's *Admire* exhibition where Moree East children were asked 'If you had one wish what would it be?' and the richness of the responses created opportunities for perceptions to be challenged through the beauty of the works produced.

Knowing the arts and creativity are such powerful tools to enable this change, the Maven Project provides the space for young people to be aspirational; to be taught and mentored by highly acclaimed Aboriginal artists who have succeeded against all odds becomes living proof that with new options (provided through the creative hub) and with increased opportunities, disadvantage doesn't have to dictate one's future. Additionally, the Maven Project develops arts and culture in the New England and Northwest region, creating a hub for excellence where professional Aboriginal artists work across many art genres including music, dance, physical theatre, film and design to create a major artistic work with young people and community to reimagine their future. This provides a creative framework for young emerging Aboriginal artists where they develop professional skills, collaborate, co-create and present new works to audiences. By working alongside these artists, they develop confidence, experience and skills to develop their careers as artists and as Mavens. Through Maven, significant new artistic projects were developed including the *Divine* writing and subsequent theatre project developed with Cathy Craigie in Armidale and *Mnemonic* developed by Kirk page for contemporary dance/body work / performance project to work with BE emerging dance artists.

The emergence of projects in 2015 with aboriginal artistic and cultural merit do justice to the Maven Project's stated original aim to become the catalyst for robust conversations between people, and their community where "[t]he works created will be so powerful and artistically profound the broader community will be compelled to take notice. Tolerance and understanding increases, acceptance and opportunity grows. The Maven Project becomes a prototype for creating social change in regional Australia".

The exciting new project which promises to really take the Maven intention to new levels is the Arts Participation Incubator Collaboratory (APIC) who are partnering with BE to deliver a skills development, cultural leadership and micro-credentialing project targeting Aboriginal artists in NSW. APIC will provide the framework for learning, assessing and recognising skills through verifiable and credible credentials - digital badges. BE will create the environment for artistic practice, collaboration and experimentation. This project



## CATHARSIS

acknowledges the burgeoning skills, talents and knowledge of artists and aims to trial digital badging as way of validating the arts. The APIC / BE partnership is a synergistic combination of expertise and resources, and a co-creation of new sector pathways and assets.

One of the more prominent and visible initiatives of the Maven project to date has been *Catharsis*. A paper shredding machine was set up in a pop up shop's front window in Armidale's main street for the public to participate in the cathartic process of writing and then shredding their thoughts and feelings until the space fills with discarded emotions, anxieties and tensions. The installation and the CCD process surrounding it sought to alleviate stress, anger, hopelessness and sadness, and leading ultimately to emotional relief. Poems and word sculptures came to life on the window as the background filled with shredded paper. After the shredding, BE invited the participants to contribute words and thoughts that reflect their unencumbered state of mind, their aspirations, affirmations and dreams for the future. These were recorded by either or all of three methods: i) interview on a laptop, ii) writing on the shop's wall or iii) in a post it box. The Catharsis space was open for four weeks in mid-2014. These recorded words and affirmations were also used to compose two songs, under the tutelage of prominent indigenous and local artists. In addition the affirmations were also used as the starting point for a conversation between young local Aboriginal people and writer Cathy Craigie. From this the idea of the new performance work *Divine* developed.

*What palpably emerged from the Catharsis workshops was that young people identify they have few prospects. They believe they've been failed by the education system, rarely have jobs, have babies early because they want to be loved, are often "open cases" with government because boyfriends use the Department as a threat and have few chances of being regarded for the divine individuals they are.*

This collaborative writing/theatre project has come about because the young people told Cathy in workshops that to 'fix' their circumstances they would need a 'divine intervention', reflecting how hopeless they sometimes feel.

Further stages for Catharsis through the final months of 2014 included paper-making workshops at the New England Regional Art Museum (NERAM), the production of three video documentaries at NERAM involving projections onto recycled paper made from the pop-up shreds, installation of vinyl text affirmations to be displayed in CBD shop windows, and finally an exhibition at NERAM. Paper shredding was completed by 98% of participants, 28% of filming and 35% of writing affirmations. Return visits once or more were 6%. There was a significant participation by group visits from institutions such as Freeman House, an alcohol and drug rehabilitation centre, TAFE Armidale Youth Links for women in association with Youth Links Duval High School, TAFE Armidale remedial education, and Mallam House, a space for counselling people with mental illness. From these groups, individuals who returned independently at least once were 15% and returned twice or more were 9%. Freeman House has run counselling sessions dealing with their visits to the Catharsis shop and strongly considering installing their own shredder. In 2015 they will continue to work with BE in-house- using the arts as a tool to drive dialogue and engagement. The paper making workshops are already fully subscribed. A class from New England Girls School also participated.

From various artists that were in residence at Catharsis, the great positive is that the process is so simple and thus is easy to garner good participation across all demographics, especially age, race and education. There was a significant response from people dealing with personal problems right through to people who live with mental health issues, scribed by one of the residing artists:

*Isabel, who has bipolar, visited many times. On her first visits, she just scribbled in an expressionist manner on five or so pieces of paper. She would remain about an hour, and then shredded. On her sixth visit, she brought in many pieces of thin black cardboard with tracings already drawn. She proceeded to*

cut them out, revealing black clouds, her symbol for depression. In addition she cut out eight differing shapes of houses. Isabel has issues in cleaning and emptying out all her housing investment real estate. She procrastinates so long that issues such as these are not addressed, acted upon or solved. This only further compounds her situation. Her houses remain unleased. Isabel is blessed with being a great artist but has no self confidence in herself. The cut out houses confirms her original artistic talent. I took a photo of her works before they were shredded.

Catharsis was an important contributor to the overall Maven Project with a total of 467 participants coming into the pop-up shop over the four week period of its installation. When I asked one of the residing artists what evidence of impact he would cite for what's going on at Catharsis, he shot back "Right there in front of you, that pile of shredded paper!" It's worth noting that sometimes initiatives like Catharsis are designed explicitly for private healing and not for assessment purpose and true community engagement respects this. While this approach might seem counter to one that is open to all processes of engagement being subject to rigorous scrutiny, an alternative viewpoint is that grounded community cultural development needs to stand strong on retaining privacy so that communities can genuinely trust a CCD process unlike the trust that's been eroded over the years through so many pilot programs inflicted on marginalised populations and communities.

### 3 MOREE

*The 3Moree program, with the support of local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and the Moree East Public School community, offered a continuum of learning and support through connecting with parents and caregivers in antenatal, supporting transition into early childhood learning and the foundation years through to stage 3 outcomes of primary education. Through the use of arts, a safety net was created to ensure all families are involved.*

3Moree had three components:

1. *Mubali* - an innovative health intervention strategy using creative art processes as a bridging tool to connect young Aboriginal Women (14- 24) to local Aboriginal midwifery services and generalist health services;
2. *Connexion* – working with 0-8 year olds, their families and the existing Schools for Community program to improve connection to early childhood opportunities, knowledge and learning;
3. *Festival of the Brolga* – alignment to the curriculum, one-on-one mentoring and arts led workshops, produced the Festival of the Brolga – an annual community festival that celebrates identity and drives connections between the school, the community, families and culture. The project worked closely with local elders and other community members in the school to tell the story of the Brolga and its relevance to modern day Moree. The project was based around workshops with young people, developing their technical and story-telling skills in dance, performance, theatre, film and song. The content and inspiration for these workshops came from the elders' and community stories and their living memories.

What emerged in the evaluation of 3Moree was the ongoing resistance of established systems of health and education to creative interventions that empowered marginalised people, young and old, to become genuinely involved. An email exchange towards the conclusion of the 'Admire' initiative (involving young students led by an emerging BE artist) between the resident school authority and BE is poignantly illustrative of these tensions:

School authority:

Hi [BE staff]

The handwritten story by [young student] needs to be edited.

Get her to hand write it again (same blurb) but use capital A for Aboriginal and change the word 'won' to 'one'.

Then it is OK with me.

### Reply

BE staff:

Hi [School Authority],

I'm sorry, I can't change the portrait. The text is an extension of [young student]'s portrait and identity and it would be unethical to correct it. The portraits belong to the creators (the children and [indigenous artist]) and they are not for us to change. In this instance, I think we could safely say these beautiful children are teaching us what it is to be human.

Have a good day,

### Reply

School authority:

My call. [young student] will need to edit it as this is all part of the writing process and [young student] has not had the opportunity to do this.

The upshot of this firm on authority stance for CI approaches is that while the intent of the education department's Connected Communities Strategy is laudable and aligned with CI theory / approaches, its translation is so dependent on creative and flexible leadership that was quite evidently lacking here.

What is also at play is that school educators are clearly being driven by performance outcomes over and above those for the most affected students where fear rules in being perceived to have achieved satisfactory traditional academic performance benchmarks.

*If culture, creativity and inventiveness has the ability to change outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families and as valued by their community, but is met with resistance from the system that has 'committed' to doing business differently, the challenge is to know what teachers would need to feel competent in genuinely moving to a more creative approach or way of working?*

For BE's ED, they need to "reposition themselves as learners". Just how difficult this is when most teachers are increasingly inundated with reporting to mostly meaningless traditional performance indicators and outcomes has been highlighted by Maven and BE, whose approach demands BE are learners

because ownership of the BE process is handed over to community and BE follows their lead. As BE's ED explains, "we learn from community what the next step is and in the creative processes, the making of art becomes the response. The language of creativity becomes a common language and builds the roadmap for each step in the journey. We are space creators; our role is to enable the space for community to be the teachers. We listen, we learn and we try to implement with community what they want to see happen for their community and for their children. It is often unruly, disruptive and it's loaded with chaos. The process is not linear and at times we all experience a feeling of groundlessness when we have no idea where it's all going. We expect to make honest mistakes. The nurturing of warm, real relationships (the disorderly type ones that exist in every family) are the foundation. And indeed Carl Jung says it is this warmth that is vital for the growing plant and the soul of the child."

Of course, it should be emphasised that such a process need not eschew outcome indicators and consistent with the commitment to impact assessment outlined above, Beyond Empathy have already managed to cite multiple successful outcomes from the Maven Project including results not cited earlier:

- Quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated significant improvements in participant self-efficacy and capacity to influence their future;
- Artistic practices were led by community with results demonstrating increased cohesion across community and with relationships with school. Over 90% of parents believe BE programs can improve school attendance, strengthen identity and help learning compared to 25% of teachers.
- 75% parents indicate BE programs strengthen pride in culture compared to 25% of teachers.
- 78% indicate BE programs strengthen relationships between children and community compared to 25% of teachers who think only somewhat and 25% not at all. 2303 page views on website since October of which 67.85% are new visitors;
- 5 conference presentations undertaken;
- Artists articulate benefits of The Maven Project as
  - o ownership over work;
  - o Developing new skills
  - o support to work on new ideas; and
  - o provision of artistic control and creative independence .
- Three artists develop new works to undertake with support of BE; and
- Two artists working on new creative ideas.



## CCD AND SOCIAL CHANGE OUTCOMES

Renowned indigenous playwright and director Wesley Enoch's provocative 2014 essay *Take Me To Your Leader – the dilemma of Cultural Leadership* amongst plenty of goading to the arts community, cries out "Did we ever have a purpose in our communities? Did you? Have we just forgotten it? Misplaced our meaning for a short time? Are we waiting for our brilliance to be finally recognised and for us to be rewarded by the masses without ever talking to them?"

My response to Enoch's plea in relation to indigenous community cultural development is that there has never been more of an imperative to directly link measurable indigenous wellbeing outcomes with indigenous CCD practice. BE talks "with the masses" routinely and Maven is clearly a manifestation of the response to these conversations, but it nonetheless remains difficult to say where BE is going or what will be achieved because its activity evolves from the conversations with community. And governed always by their ten principles – that is always the anchor. While it is well understood that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island arts are amongst the oldest art traditions in the world and art has always been an important part of indigenous life, actual measures remain limited to indigenous participation in indigenous cultural activities and perceptions of indigenous arts. Certainly measures such as the 2014 *Arts in Daily Life: Australian Participation in the Arts* reporting 92 percent of Australians believing that 'Indigenous arts are an important part of Australia's culture', may indicate the continuing vitality of indigenous cultural heritage and wide participation as a significant means of maintaining group membership and cultural identity, but the achievements remain acknowledged almost entirely within the arts and cultural sector. Recognition of the importance of indigenous arts extends further to laudable federal government funded initiatives such as the Indigenous Cultural Support (ICS) projects including an objective to "promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing by strengthening pride in identity and culture" but again there is little onus placed on linking with measurable wellbeing outcomes for indigenous communities. To be clear, this is not to suggest that artistic professional development programs ought to have their funding tied directly to the achievement of improved wellbeing measures but rather to encourage the large scale social change and collective impact initiatives targeting indigenous communities to more actively integrate CCD into their implementation and assessment. How does, for example, an evaluation capture the feeling of the raucous 600 strong audiences cheering their kids on when it's so difficult to survey them on the spot, and audio-visual material sadly remains a poor substitute for rigorous evidence?

The most pertinent Australian example in this respect would undoubtedly be the Closing the Gap initiative. Interestingly, the 2013 Closing the Gap commissioned discussion paper *Engaging with Indigenous Australia* written by Janet Hunt from the Australian Institute for Health & Welfare while observing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities know and articulate the many benefits of keeping culture strong, "the evidence base lags behind community voices and experiences as the effect of culture is difficult to measure. However, there is a growing body of research supporting the community view that positive outcomes stem from keeping culture strong". Hunt, in summarising 'What we don't know' (p.4), further emphasises missing evidence across a number of scenarios:

- We don't know how to overcome the persistent challenges governments face in trying to engage on the ground in a flexible, whole-of-government way within systems that are based on upward departmental accountabilities;
- It isn't known how to engage effectively where an Indigenous community is in conflict, has highly fractured governance or has weak leadership;
- There is little or no research evidence about successful engagement arrangements in urban areas or the Torres Strait Islands;
- There is no research evidence about either models of engagement for national or other levels of policy development or the role of Indigenous peak bodies in engagement strategies;

- The evidence from the most recent innovations by various jurisdictions in relation to engagement models and approaches is not available;
- The range of sectors for which there is significant research on successful approaches to program/project level engagement is limited.
- Research evidence of how free, prior and informed consent has been put into practice in governmental engagement processes and its impact is not yet available.

For all the significant work that was undertaken to create the six COAG Closing the Gap targets<sup>1</sup>, it must not go unrecognised that scant attention has been given to how community cultural development processes might be an effective mechanism to actually achieve these targets. As it happens, a number of initiatives associated with Closing the Gap have engaged the arts and cultural sector but the perception is more one of an accidental than a deliberate engagement with the arts. At least some of the missing evidence, or what we don't know cited above, may well lie in BE's cultural performances, exhibits and audience responses (eg shredded paper) permeating through indigenous CCD (BE's) processes but not articulated in the traditional language of research and evaluation outcomes. It might also lie in the CCD processes that BE commits to where they can confidently cite plentiful examples of responses that indicate they do know many of the answers to Hunt's 'what we don't know' dot points above.

## CCD AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Of course, it has not gone unnoticed that in the emerging professional field of cultural development, funders and host organisations increasingly seek to understand the impact of work they support or lead. Arts and cultural sector leaders are challenged in this environment to fully explicate outcomes. Evaluation approaches infrequently take a holistic approach, instead often focusing predominantly on social or economic outcomes. Commonly, other outcomes are sometimes categorized as intrinsic and therefore considered immeasurable. Consequently, as Kim Dunphy notes in her new edited book *Making Culture Count: the politics of cultural measurement*, "much of the benefit of arts engagement can be missed... evaluation approaches commonly only consider benefits, and offer no assessment of negative or neutral outcomes, or proportion of benefit to costs". This is definitely a trap that BE has diligently sought to address, asking honest questions of itself and partners in identifying why certain initiatives were more effective than others, and not only upon reflection but dynamically during the lifecycle of a project like Maven.

Dunphy proposed a solution to those dilemmas via a holistic framework for evaluation of outcomes of arts engagement. The framework pre-supposes an intention by program leaders and funders to make a positive

contribution to the lives of participants, and in so doing, to the wider community. It is proposed as useful for government (national, state and local), non-government and community organisations as well as individual artists and arts workers who have a positive change goal and seek to understand the implications of their work. The framework offers a means of considering different: perspectives of change (who perceived and experienced the change); dimensions of change (what type of change occurred); and degree of change (how much change occurred), to arrive at an overall assessment of project outcomes. Taking this holistic approach, it was apparent in 3Moree that significantly different perceptions of change and effectiveness between the teachers and the community emerged and any authentic evaluation framework must be prepared to grapple with these differences.

But however holistic the perspective on change, if it's only to assess outcomes of a particular project – even a very large project – the impact is still likely to be relatively contained and highly context dependent. Here emerges the promise of Collective Impact (CI) with its challenge to the traditional model of a community group identifying an isolated need, then creating a service for that need, demonstrating results, and scaling their service to more people in hopes of creating larger societal change. CI instead begins with changing the community overall and works backward. It begins by setting a goal (for example, any of the COAG Closing the Gap targets) and then builds an ecosystem of nonprofits, government agencies, schools, businesses, philanthropists, local community groups and community leaders who create common strategies and coordinate integrated activities among them to achieve the goal.

The highly credible community activist Paul Schmitz and a regular commentator on collective impact has identified a few concerns about how CI gets implemented in a seminal piece *The Real Challenge for Collective Impact* (Huffington Post, 2012). Firstly, he identifies that the process by which leaders from different organizations, sectors, and levels of influence come together for CI is incredibly important and should not be rushed. These efforts, if done well, will require dedicated engagement, patience, deliberation, debate, and conflict. Secondly, he worries that the relentless focus on short-term data can trap groups into doing the most measurable activities, not necessarily the right ones. Members of CI efforts may remain focused on isolated needs and outcomes rather than thinking in a more integrated way about problems and long-term solutions. Thirdly, to solve our social problems in our communities, Schmitz suggests the solution must be to build stronger communities, not just stronger programs and services and yet, many CI efforts are still all about institutions and organizations doing things to communities, not with communities. In this context, CCD entities like BE that are so fundamentally committed to working closely with communities become even more important in an environment promoting collective impact. My own experiences to date of CI initiatives in Australia is that while there is a strong commitment to community development processes, the CI core

1. Close the life expectancy gap within a generation. Halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade. Halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade. Halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade. Within five years, all four year olds in remote Indigenous communities have access to quality early childhood education programs. At least halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 or equivalent rates by 2015.

principle of “shared measurement” is still largely left to university-based researchers to both determine and implement, flying in the face of letting the community itself gauge what is reasonable social return on investment.

Perhaps Schmitz’s most telling observation is that while much of the early research and work on collective impact has emphasized the structural, strategic, and measurable, “to succeed long-term, there must be more attention paid to the cultural. Culture is created through shared values, expectations, and goals. These must be built intentionally, transparently, and evolve with the project”. How early CI initiatives in Australia might face up to this considerable challenge - including the incorporation of community cultural development practice into a framework so focused on measurable outcomes - is already looming as one of the ‘game-changing’ moments for CI and its authenticity, particularly in indigenous communities. To this end, BE has legitimate claims as a “game changer” because this is how it works, with BE expecting things to get worse before they get better, hence demanding that sufficient time is required.

## MEASURING (CULTURAL) PROGRESS

Another significant intersection faced by the growing interest in community cultural development measurement and impact is its relationship with the citizen-based global progress measurement movement which has emerged in the past decade, with its potential for realisation of a new paradigm for democracy, good governance and authentic cultural engagement. The benefits emerging already from this movement appear to be significant. These include new and more dynamic forms of democratic engagement; the demonstration of clearer linkages between strong democratic and human rights regimes, and broader individual and societal wellbeing; new ways to define and measure a ‘healthy’ democracy; and perhaps most importantly, a re-examination of the nature of progress and democracy in the 21st century. The limited extent to which cultural indicators have featured in the emergence of the global progress measurement movement and its democratising ambitions is revealing and whilst it is a reminder of a long way to go, there are significant place-based community indicator systems like Community Indicators Victoria (CIV) that stoke some optimism.

*CIV aims to improve the community wellbeing of all Victorians by creating equitable, engaged, healthy and well-planned communities through evidence based policy and planning, reporting and monitoring, and enhanced democracy.*

The indicator system forms an important resource for local governments in Victoria following amendment of the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* (Vic.) which stipulated the use of evidence for deciding on health priorities and interventions during municipal public health and wellbeing planning based on a four year planning cycle. One area of health and wellbeing of particular interest to local governments and communities is the importance and value of the arts. Very limited data exists on the use and measured impact of the arts on community wellbeing, despite a widely acknowledged acceptance of the social and economic benefits to the wider community. Very few quantitative sources are available as evidence of this value despite estimates of cultural and creative activity contributing \$86 billion to Australia’s national accounts in 2008-09.

Arts and culture were included in the CIV framework of community wellbeing in recognition of the importance of these activities for community identity and the role of art, film and literature for interpretative communication on contemporary social issues. Early consultation in the development of the framework suggested the inclusion of arts and culture indicators that measured *actual participation* in arts and cultural activities as well as *opportunities for participation* in arts and cultural activities. The focus on participation provided a narrow measure of the arts. This is consistent with the role of community indicators, which are not designed as all-encompassing measures. Indicators are effectively the tip of the iceberg and act as a monitoring tool, providing a starting point for further investigation and community discussion. Indicators are, by definition, aggregated data or broad measures of community progress that need to be anchored to policy levers to create future change. They also need to measure issues deemed important to a community (as identified in the consultation process leading to the development of the CIV framework), monitor trends and drive advocacy or action for future change. With a growing list of indicators included in the CIV framework, the arts indicators included in CIV were designed as broad measures that could be understood by the general public in a large scale community survey. Most importantly, *opportunities to participate* in arts activity in the local area were separated from *actual participation* to measure local access, and general community support that might not translate into individual interest or actual involvement. CIV is a unique and rare provider of indicator data on arts participation and opportunities for arts participation but as its coordinator Melanie Davern writes in a chapter of Dunphy’s edited book cited above, “future indicators of arts should aspire to expand beyond participation and focus more on the diverse contribution of art in creating healthy, cohesive and engaged communities”. Again, there is plenty of evidence gathered by BE - albeit not in the form of traditional quantitative indicators – that puts forward a compelling case for its significant contribution to creating more healthy, cohesive and engaged communities. The more such evidence can be incorporated into larger regional progress indicator initiatives, the more confident we can all be that these are indicators of genuine progress.

## CONCLUSION

Certainly the scale at which community-driven progress and sustainability indicators have grown in the past decade suggests that what began as a series of diverse experiments is already a global movement. And there is now some optimism that this global movement may bring a paradigm shift in public policy, which threatens to replace two long dominant assumptions: the primacy of continuous economic growth as the key driver of wellbeing; and the historically powerful but deterministic notion of the 'inevitability of progress'.

In their place, this new paradigm offers a more holistic, integrated and nuanced model that recognises the interdependence of economic, social, cultural, environmental and democratic dimensions for equitable and sustainable wellbeing: that is, genuine progress. The most important outcome of the OECD's project on measuring progress may ultimately be the fact that it has launched a global democratic debate about the meaning of progress.

This conclusion was strikingly evident in November 2007 for anyone attending both the European Union conference 'Beyond GDP' in the European Parliament in Brussels, and immediately after, the Third Gross National Happiness conference in Chang Mai, Thailand. The language and values were different, and the settings and participants could not have been more dissimilar, but the message from both of these very different conferences was exactly the same: 'It is time to end the mismeasurement of progress by economic growth alone, and to move to a new and more legitimate paradigm that is people centred, equitably distributed and environmentally and socially sustainable' (UNDP 1996, iii).

How community cultural and artistic measures of progress integrate with the broader global movement still remains uncertain, particularly in the face of many neo-liberal western governments determined to return to narrowly struck economic growth agendas in the shadow of the global financial crisis and another potentially looming. The CIV example, however, is illustrative of how bottom-up community indicator initiatives can enable a genuinely democratic approach to measures of progress, an endeavour that is critically reliant on the arts and cultural sector to contribute integrated measures.

As the Australian Cultural Minister's Council 2011 discussion paper *Vital Signs: Cultural Indicators for Australia* demonstrated, there is visible recognition that measuring the value of culture and art is becoming increasingly significant, but the challenge of determining the most effective measures and at various scales stubbornly persists. As the Chair of the National Cultural Policy Reference Group, Julianne Schultz observed in August 2013 at the *Arts and Public Life Breakfast Series* in Sydney:

*We have to be more ambitious and smarter in finding a way to measure the public value of culture. We know it exists, but we have not yet found the right way to measure it. We also have to be more ambitious in measuring the intrinsic value of the work produced by artists and the costs that fall disproportionately on them and their families because their work is not properly valued; the institutional in terms of a national ethos which draws visitors or inspires productive innovation; the instrumental value, like the well documented legacy for children of exposure and involvement in arts and culture to successful and engaged lives, and the commercial value which is contributing more to the national economy than many other sectors.*

We could do a lot worse than to kick-start this collective ambition to better measure culture's value with a solid grounding in community cultural development and practice that not only unashamedly prioritises local community's outcomes but just as importantly, actively engages the community in determining the way these outcome measures should be constructed and then attained. So, in short, beyond empathy...

## PROFILE

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Geoff works with a diverse range of public and private sector organisations helping develop whole of community outcome measures for a variety of social interventions, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged communities. He is especially interested in building more effective evidence of what place-based approaches work to improve children's wellbeing.