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How do you create real change?
Mapping out a path towards better communities

Presentation by
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Video and audio versions of this speech are available at
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About the presentation

We all want to improve our communities, but sometimes it feels like everyone and everything is out to stop us. Why are we hitting these roadblocks? How can we move past them? No seismic shift will ever occur within our communities if we don't look at how social change is made, then map out our own paths. It's time to ask – how do you create real change?

Denis Moriarty

I'd like to welcome Professor Chris Roche to the stage, who'll be talking about how social change is made so that we can use the information to map our path forward. We all know some of these tricks of social change because we've been doing it all our life, but when you hear someone so eminent as Chris putting it into a framework and telling us this is how to do it properly, it's enlightening.

Chris is Professor of Development Practice at La Trobe University, where he is also the Director of the Institute for Human Security and Social Change. He is also Deputy Director (Impact) of the Developmental Leadership Program, an international research program which explores how leadership, power and political processes drive or block successful development. He co-led the program's work on gender and politics in practice, and prior to joining La Trobe in 2012, Chris worked for over 25 years for international non-government organisations as a project manager, evaluator, policy researcher and director. He was one of us at one stage.

He is particularly interested in understanding the practice of social change processes and how those involved might be more effectively supported. Please make him welcome.

Professor Chris Roche

Thank you, Denis, for that big up that I certainly don't deserve. I'd like to acknowledge first the Wurundjeri people, who are the traditional custodians of this unceded land upon which we meet, and also pay my respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to other Indigenous Australians present today.

And I'd also like to acknowledge the Warlpiri people of the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory, whose experience I will be sharing today, as well as the traditional owners of an island called Simbo on the Solomon Islands, which I'll be also talking about.

Now, whilst this talk – the title of this talk is "How do you create real change?" – I think the first thing to say is the frontline practice, the practice of community work and development that many of you are directly involved in, is creating real change and in many different ways, but I would argue that it's undervalued, poorly understood and too often invisible, not by those practising it but by those who seek to support it and fund it, and it's because it is undervalued, poorly understood and arguably under-researched that well-meaning attempts to support this frontline practice often, as you well know, screw it up, and, in so doing, demotivates the change agents, activists and community organisations that are at the heart of this work.

And because this work is poorly understood and undervalued, we fail to learn how these grass roots and local processes of change can contribute to and indeed drive more systemic and sustained change more broadly. And furthermore, I will argue, this is not just the case for regional, state and national level change in Australia but this also applies to Australia's ability to be a good international citizen helping address the common challenges that our region faces of climate change, gender-based violence and discrimination and growing inequality.

So what do we know about local frontline change and how it happens? What are the obstacles and barriers which prevent local change processes being valued, understood and effectively supported, and what are the questions we need to ask ourselves about how these obstacles might be

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confronted and addressed? As Einstein once said, "Asking the right questions is half the battle."

Now, I'm going to use three examples of initiatives my team at La Trobe University have been involved in over a number of years to illustrate how we might better appreciate local processes of change and what this might tell us about how these initiatives might be better supported. I also want to draw on experiences from beyond our shores and explore what they might tell us and how we can make in some senses the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

So the woman at the front of this boat is Esther Suti from the small island of Simbo in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands, which has a population of some 1,800 people. In 2012, Esther, who was at the time based in Gizo, the provincial capital on a neighbouring island some 30 kilometres away by boat, had noticed that women who travelled from Simbo to sell agricultural products in the market were often subject to violence and harassment. Furthermore, the trip to Gizo often involved an overnight stay for those women and raised concerns about child care and protection back on the island. Esther wanted to assist her fellow islanders in addressing these issues by exploring how alternative livelihood options might reduce travel demands and promote family safety and reduce gender-based violence.

Ten years later, some 300 beehives are now in use on the island with income projected at more than half a million Solomon Island dollars per annum – that's about 88,000 Australian dollars – and it has been used to pay school fees and improve housing, and Simbo honey, which comes from those hives, has gained a national reputation, and Solomons honey bees more generally are seen as a viable source of income right across the country.

As a result of this increase of income on the island, the place of women in community life has also shifted and their voice amplified through a renewed island-wide women's association, and, extraordinarily, Simbo became the first internationally accredited organic island in the Solomons, attracting interest and investment from provincial and national

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governments which has further invested in the island's waste management, primary school system and health clinic.

Now, this locally focused initiative reinvigorated the island using a mix of support to local livelihoods and work that brought the community together using appeals to Christianity and traditional leadership. Yet far from being a conservative social movement, at the same time the process has been able to address gender equality and reduce domestic violence, and whilst this change process was led by Esther Suti and her husband, it was in practice supported by a much broader network of actors beyond the island, and indeed Esther travelled 3,000 kilometres to Samoa to work with and create friendships with the Samoan Women In Business Development group which supported all of the work on the island.

Esther also worked hard to ensure that all four clan groups on the island and the chiefs of those tribes were engaged. This was a politically shrewd way of mobilising the collective identity of the island that respected the place of existing leaders while allowing space for new activities and challenge to their leadership to emerge. This careful navigation of local politics and power was central to the success of this initiative, as was the ability to build a local, national and international network for change.

The second example I want to talk about is the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust in the Tanami Desert. Some of you may know of this initiative. In 2001, a group of Warlpiri teachers, most of them women, approached the director of the Central Land Council, David Ross, and proposed redirecting some traditional royalties that came from mining on Warlpiri country to support education, i.e. to use some of the royalties for collective rather than an individual or family benefit.

As an Aboriginal man who had seen the challenges arising from individual distributions, David Ross agreed to support the proposal, despite some fierce opposition from some other – a vocal minority of traditional owners, and this led to the creation of the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust and a new agreement between the traditional owners – the Central Land Council and the mining company, which included provision to establish a trust in which additional royalty monies were paid, and this was paid

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annually by the mine for locally determined education projects in the four Warlpiri communities of Lajamanu, Nyirripi, Willowra and Yuendumu in the Tanami Desert.

At the same time, an advisory committee was established to bring together the group of Warlpiri teachers who had the initial vision for the program, which included educational experts. And since that time, the program has distributed over 40 million dollars' worth of funding from royalties for locally determined education projects, including early childhood care, interstate visits for school kids, country visits to augment the schools' educational processes and diversionary programs for teenagers.

And over time, as demonstrable outcomes could be seen within Warlpiri communities from these investments and the concept of investing royalty income in community development became more familiar, trust between the advisory committee and the traditional owners grew and previous conflict and tensions evident in the early phases lessened, and the research and an independent evaluation has demonstrated the contribution this has made, particularly to enhancing notions of self-determination and a sense of control, in a part of the world where people feel very little control over their lives, and it's improved school participation, wellbeing and strengthened maintenance of Warlpiri culture and language.

And the picture that has disappeared is the community's story of this program and it's read bottom to top, so up the spine here is the main meetings and decisions that have been made. Here is the granite mines where the money is actually from, and a number of the projects that are demonstrated here. Perhaps most interestingly is this picture, and I don't know if you can see it: these are meetings held in Alice Springs where these Warlpiri women tell the story of their journey, and that in fact is a PowerPoint presentation that they gave to the 90 council members of the Land Council. And in so doing, they actually changed the Land Council policy on the use of royalties for collective benefit for all of the communities that the Central Land Council generated. So not only have these women promoted change within their own community, they have

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shifted the policies and practices of the Central Land Council more broadly. Again, an interesting example.

Now, the final example is slightly different. When COVID hit the world in early 2020, the institute I worked with, along with the Australian Red Cross and the Humanitarian Advisory Group, started some research into the significant natural experiment that was unfolding in the Pacific as the vast majority of non-Pacific international aid workers, diplomats and expatriates returned to their homes. We were particularly interested in how these circumstances changed the ways of working of local people in international organisations, and the degree to which this has created space for local leadership to emerge.

Now, while the full impacts of the pandemic will take more time to be understood, it's already affected day-to-day ways of work in the Pacific quite significantly. In particular, the reduced physical presence of international aid workers and diplomats has considerably enlarged the space for strengthened local leadership. Local people report greater influence over decision making and greater empowerment as a result.

They report more decentralised responses, greater use of local relationships, more flexibility to adapt and change of circumstances to determine, and more than three-quarters of respondents to a survey we did agree or strongly agree that the experience of COVID will strengthen locally led work in the future.

What was particularly interesting is the Pacific Islands has also experienced significantly changed day-to-day practices in the work environment with the absence of expatriates. They reported meetings being held in local languages, not English (who would have thought), more systematic inclusion of prayers at the beginning and end of meetings and generally less formality, a more relaxed atmosphere, more laughter and, in their words, less of a sense of surveillance. Moreover, Pacific Islanders felt less need to negotiate and separate their professional and personal lives, for instance with children more commonly present in the offices after school. They also identified they felt freer to identify options and solutions and think more creatively about their work. And

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finally they noticed increased levels of communication and collaboration across organisations and less competition, which had been driven previously.

At the same time, they said they observed that whilst monitoring and evaluation and learning in organisations is frequently seen to be a rigid activity focused on upwards reporting, the empowerment of local actors is providing some interesting innovations. As a result, they have been drawing on storytelling in particular, and we heard Eleanor Bourke talking this morning about the importance of storytelling, or talk story, as they call it, as a common way of capturing and sharing knowledge that makes values of local experience, knowledge and dialogue, and these forms of monitoring have seemed to result in more locally meaningful data gathering, learning and adaptation.

This experience shows how crises often shine a bright light on power relations and inequality. The COVID experience brought the limitations of existing ways of working in international development and humanitarian to the fore. Stemming from this, the scales seem to be tipping towards greater emphasis on locally owned, locally led processes, but the extent to which this occurs, and importantly is sustained, remains to be seen. However, we are starting to see an emergence of an alliance determined to shift the power, as it's now being called, in support of locally led development, or as you, or at least Denis, might call it, putting communities in control.

But as the sector shifts back into a COVID-normal state or a pre-COVID state, international actors will return to the Pacific. The new natural experiment will begin. We are presented with a valuable window of opportunity to learn from and adopt new practices and approaches that will build on the positive experiences, but a big fear expressed by several informants was this opportunity we've missed in the rush to return to normal. This is a question which is certainly relevant to Australia as well.

So while these stories are very different and come from very different places, they also have a number of important similarities. Furthermore, I think they illustrate some of the same ingredients for success that other

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broader and more systemic processes of social change also contain, whether that be efforts to end apartheid or violence against women, promote same sex marriage, control tobacco, end racism, address climate change or fight for a living wage.

So first they involve collective action. They are not the story of a big man or woman of history, the charismatic individual who changes the world on their own. Esther Suti reached out to people way beyond the arm of Simbo, and indeed beyond her nation, to an organisation 3,000 kilometres away at the same time as mobilising a community-wide process of collective action and building links with provincial and national allies. The Warlpiri women I spoke of built alliances with senior figures in the Central Land Council but also sought out international technical expertise and advice as required.

As Daniel reminded us, getting together, talking, thinking and acting, or writing, is important, but what also is important and many people talk about in these movements is the importance of friendship, relationships and solidarity.

Second, I think they indicate that politics and power matter and usually a lot more than evidence. This is not to deny the importance of evidence and science but, as the experience of COVID has shown us and as debates on tobacco control and climate change illustrate even more clearly, having great evidence is not enough, particularly when there is vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

For example, of interest to this topic is there is abundant evidence built on a massive dataset that what Dan Honig has called navigation by judgment or trusting frontline staff and activists to use their knowledge of local context and their relationships to drive change is much more successful, particularly in complex environments, than when they are the subject of central control or trapped in projects and funding agreements which are dominated by meeting pre-specified targets and rigid plans. Yet how often do funding agencies, government departments provide that space and allow for that discretion?

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The experience of the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust, an example of where local people used their own royalty money to work in ways they deemed to be important for purposes that they value, illustrates what happens when that control shifts. Successful alliances and coalitions therefore often seek to either frame issues in ways the public can recognise and which are memorable. Think "Tobacco Kills", "Black Lives Matter", or maybe "Shift the Power".

At the same time, these initiatives deliberately try to build collective power by building relationships, for example with elements of the media, with influential insiders who support their cause, or with figures who have recently left office and can speak honestly. And with those with legal policy or technical skills that are also required to promote their cause, it is these intricate processes of coalition building that are usually critical to shifting broader policies and practices. Not to mention the important aspects of mutual and self-care that are required.

Third, they require making the invisible visible. In the international development field, Rebecca Warne Peters, in her book *Implementing Inequality: The Invisible Labour of International Development*, points out that the day-to-day frontline work of social change and community engagement is the hardest, the most challenging, the most stressful and the least rewarded, if it can be rewarding. I'd be very surprised if you felt that was not the same in Australia.

Building and maintaining relationships, brokering diverse viewpoints, pushing back on powerful interests, adapting to unexpected events and crises are all challenging and demand high levels of skill, emotional intelligence, and demand going above and beyond, and yet not only is this work mostly invisible, the arguably much easier work of program management, policy development, allocation of funding and report writing is not only more visible but is more prestigious and better paid, that is if frontline work is paid at all.

It's high time this changed. What is arguably particularly important here is recognising that most of the usual tools and methods that are used to assess, monitor and evaluate community work are actually unable to see

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this invisible work. They tend to focus on the concrete, the tangible, the countable, the budget spent, the numbers of people trained, schools or clinics built, jobs provided, which, whilst important, tell us nothing about how these things are achieved or indeed if arguably more important and less tangible things have changed, like people's self-esteem or sense of worth, their relationships to each other or with the land or environment, or their progress towards self-determination and community control. It's a bit like trying to understand how a tree grows by only looking at the tree trunk, branches and leaves above the ground, and not exploring the root system and the soil in which the tree is embedded.

Happily, we are seeing a range of initiatives in this part of the world which privilege local knowledge, storytelling, yarning and the weaving together of Indigenous and scientific knowledge. This is happening in Indigenous Australia. It's happening with the Kaupapa Maori movements for evaluation and it's happening in the Pacific where they're involved – this is about drawing on centuries of experience of how master navigators of the region journeyed across vast distances using their knowledge of the stars, their feel of the sea currents and their connection to the ocean and all its life forms. This is reinvigorating a discussion in the Pacific and in this part of the world that could be offered internationally.

However, these forms of knowledge gathering and sharing are still not mainstream and are still considered by many to be less rigorous and less valid than more orthodox approaches. That also needs to change.

And finally, successful alliances, coalitions or movements prepare for and then harness external events, crises or what some call critical junctures or windows of opportunity. These are turning points and moments when the normal influences of power relations that drive behaviour are significantly relaxed for a short period, meaning in those moments there are more options available to decision makers and the impact of their decisions can be more momentous and long-lasting. Think the Arab Spring Occupy movement, COVID-19 or the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement.

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Our tracking in real time the effect of COVID on relationships with expatriates and local staff during COVID illustrates one of the reasons why these moments can be so powerful: namely, it not only provoked some deep reflection from Pacific Islanders about why the hell they had previously put up with ways of working that were deeply problematic, but it also busted many of the myths about why those previous ways of working were needed in the first place and revealed how the day-to-day practices embed power relations in ways that often are considered normal.

So what might all this mean for how communities can be more in control? What are the questions we need to ask ourselves at this moment if we are to build on what we know about what makes for successful efforts of promoting social change and if we want to make bigger waves?

One, what are the initiatives, alliances, coalitions or movements that already exist and can be strengthened and broadened if they are brought together, apart from, of course, the Communities in Control movement? What mix of community leaders, technical expertise, researchers and political allies are required to counter the status quo and challenge vested interests and what international links might be needed to do that?

Second, how do we frame the agenda we seek to promote in ways that mobilise people supporters and make the invisible work that you will do visible, valued and recognised? How do we advance processes of change which shift not just visible power which is embedded in policies, practices and organisations, but also the deeper sets of ideas and beliefs about what is considered normal and which hold the current system in place? This is not as much about scaling out or scaling up but scaling deep.

Thirdly, how do we identify, bring together and promote the innovations in monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing which allow us and others to see and understand the inspiring locally led collective action which is so often invisible and, as such, so often discounted?

And four, what might be the critical events or junctures which are likely to arise in the next few years? If COVID has been a kind of dress rehearsal for

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even more disruptive change, which the climate crisis or, god forbid, conflict in the region might generate, then what have we learned about how to prepare and respond to the next shock in the system? And if the change in government and shifts in our political landscape over the weekend provide a moment, how might we respond?

It is interesting to note there are two things that Pacific Islanders are calling for. One is climate change, obviously. An existential threat. But the second is that many Pacific Islanders are saying that if Australia can't reconcile with its own Indigenous population, it can't reach a treaty, if it can't respect the Indigenous knowledge of its own people, it can't expect to be a citizen on the world stage.

I'd be really interested in hearing your experience about these ideas and expressions and I think we may have some time to do that.

Thank you.

ENDS

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