



Progressive Thinking:

Ten Possible Futures for Public & Community Services

Being a fisherwoman or a gardener: How COVID-19 lockdown turned Community on its head

Janie Walker

I walked past Frank Bainimarama, Prime Minister of Fiji, at the Climate Action Pacific Partnership conference a couple of years ago. He had an air of importance – although shorter and softer than I imagined – but he also just looked like a man, doing a job. A couple of weeks later I had a conversation with the turaga-ni-koro (head man) in a village in Eastern Fiji who said that, in his village, Frank Bainimarama is also a fisherman, or a gardener – or whatever role his whakapapa designed him to be: And that this was his first responsibility.

From what I experienced in Fiji, this individual *and* collective responsibility is designed to keep villages functioning and sustainable. This responsibility rubs against global forces like capitalism, urbanisation and the contemporary form of colonisation: These forces are often a tension against the roots of functioning cultural and social infrastructure which nurture responsibilities. These infrastructures are fundamental to a Fijian way of life and many Pacific thinkers and doers say it holds the key for the Pacific to protest and protect its best features.

Back home, I've been working towards what this inherent heart of citizenship means here. Last year I wrote an engagement strategy for a Government agency and tried to disrupt the conventional order of stakeholders – you may be familiar with the top-down list of perceived power – Government at the top, then a muddle of business, Iwi, NGOs and community groups. First, I supported discussion with colleagues that Iwi are not a stakeholder but a partner and that Iwi stand first and alongside all that we do. Secondly, I put community at the top of our list of stakeholders, because even though we were talking about an engagement strategy for a tourism project, the project's purpose was to increase the wellbeing of all New Zealanders.

I proposed that community not only belonged at the top but the vertical stakeholder structure would not attract collaboration, innovation or equity. Alas, community remained smothered at the bottom and, with Frank's heavy bag of fresh cassava on my shoulders, I started looking for my next job.

I am now happily working for a social enterprise who not only places community at the top (and the centre) but gives Community a metaphorical capital letter. We support and build social infrastructure that thrives in pandemics and floods. The mechanism we do this is through a passion of mine - my first sense of Community (personally and now professionally) – volunteering.

The word 'volunteering' is both arming and disarming. There is a traditional, Western profile of a volunteer – a white woman in her 60s who has spare time to 'do good'. And while we absolutely need these volunteers and future cohorts, we could be diversifying what a volunteer is. Covid has forced a change in volunteer profiles because many traditional volunteers are over 65 and have not been able to physically volunteer. And they may not be coming back. Covid has also forced another



change on the volunteer sector: those who could not effectively recruit, train, collaborate and communicate online, were forced to reduce their services, or simply cease.

During lockdown, Stephen Moe from *Seeds* led some good work in the charity and community/NGO sector. He facilitated an open letter to the Prime Minister identifying that, “Many organisations will need support to completely rethink their strategy, funding models, impact models, and resilience support. How can professional services and capability support be immediately made available to charities at this critical time?” What I think he was really advocating for was for Community to be blown out of the margins and swept into the hearts and mind of all political and power levels.

Community group *Inspiring Communities* talks about a once-in-a-generation opportunity where local community is the critical setting: localism and citizen empowerment from a strengths-based way of working. This approach has always been there but I’m constantly broken-hearted at the way some doers of this approach have to fight daily for what they know is needed and right. During lockdown many of these people were deliverers of public services – health workers, care workers, local Government working in emergency management offices. Many put themselves at risk to keep us safe. I’ve heard of some disability support workers who decided to live in with their clients to continue their care – at the expense of their own lives and families. These people know what happens when the personal and professional collide without support.

There are of course some awesome Government initiatives and support for localism: My colleagues at Be Collective are supporting the build of social-infrastructure in the Wairarapa where community groups, councillors, the local volunteer centre, volunteers, and others work collaboratively to support the people they care about through volunteering. This includes Fab Feathy (fabulous Featherston!) – a DIA community-led development project - creates community networking opportunities, pot luck dinners, expos and community mapping. This DIA work appears to be at capacity now, but shouldn’t it be the opposite?

Be Collective’s work in the Wairarapa is now being scoped to widen the ecosystem that supports Community to including marae, education, business and unlikely players. It is growing because those already involved know that digital collaboration is a fighter of pandemics and, as we move into recovery and beyond, a major driver of resilience. They also know that, together, they are a powerful resource to broadcast their needs and fill the gaps within their own Community ecosystem.

Other forms of community-led initiatives emerged in lockdown too: #Aotearoa2020vision – Iwi leaders plan for a post-Covid future; Manaaki – the love letter to small business; Chin Wag – Hosted chats with global strangers; and many others. How do we personally *and professionally* get closer to our communities? And is this considered volunteering? Listening and valuing NGOs and community groups more innovatively is an obvious start. And always asking, who is *not* at the table, and what unlikely conversations can we have?

Communities collaborate naturally and they know this collaboration is crucial to surviving and flourishing. They also know what they need and how to work towards addressing their local challenges. And so do people. Innovative recovery from Covid could be told quite brilliantly through



storytelling about the people we've all met during lockdown (while physically distancing of course – not social distancing, please!).

I met a woman a few times on the beach during lockdown who totally inspired me. I first noticed her clothes - a groovy cowboy hat and red hibiscus shorts – and we both stayed a second longer after that initial wave and kia ora. She described her own childhood as really tough. After raising three children on a benefit she wanted something more. She worked incredibly hard to get a degree in health and worked in the sector for years but then got burnt out. Now, she is considering doing something “for herself” and wonders what this could look like. I talked about how I began my Master's degree at the age of 47. We talked about what topic she would pick if she went back to do her Master's too. She was one of those residents who did the shopping for all her elderly neighbours, because she felt responsible.

We were high above the beach, along the cliff top, with the wind whipping around us, and I found her brilliant strength inspiring. But I also felt that she was at a crucial time in her life where she could either fall back or fly forwards. What does she need and is she going to get it? Will spending more time in our own communities mean we will get to know people like her more so we can do better for them?

A recent United Way survey highlighted that there is underfunding in social services of around \$630 million: The survey also showed that 41% of the 200 charities surveyed required additional staff and volunteers to provide New Zealanders in need with the same support available before the pandemic. Income streams through gaming machines is challenged (I mean really, our sports, arts and community sector is partly funded by gambling!) and income through philanthropy has decreased. I will continue to discuss how volunteering can be part of Community innovation as the sector face challenges, because volunteering slams the personal and professional together. It builds social networks which we know improve disaster recovery and resilience.

All sectors are united in challenge and potential right now which saw a genuine cross-agency nature of the Covid response. My little sister worked on a project to bring trapped New Zealanders from around the globe back home, working within a team drawn from across the public service. And I think we all recognise that we have changed somewhat, both personally and professionally. New Zealand was asked at the beginning of lockdown, “What are you willing to give up to save lives?” I'm now asking, what will I not give up? There are people coming up with clever frameworks but I think it starts at the personal.

So as I write this, with a bag of cassava on my back - and the strangers that I have met from my local walks during lockdown and down the levels – on my shoulder, I turn to myself. I feel power and action shift from institutions to people. I ask myself what my role in my own suburb is and how does that influence my job and the impact I make.

I've been walking past my local paint-peeled community centre looking building, wondering, what is this a place for? There's a piece of paper that is slapped crookedly inside the front window telling me what the rules of using the building are. The list would put anyone off connecting here! But I do know that these places are usually under resourced: The local council does its best to maintain aging



infrastructure with the little resources it has. But this building is an uninspiring little place for Community. If it is a community centre at all.

I have contacted the council to ask if I can get involved there none the less. I want to bring my professional skills, my new trajectory for Community, and hopefully get to stand alongside the woman with the cowboy hat, and others. Would I call myself a volunteer? Yes but it doesn't sit comfortably because it infers it's "other" work. It's not – it's part of me, and it's part of my responsibility. And I'd expect my employer to give me some regular time off to do so, because that is not only the future of work, that is the future of Community.

There's been a lot of talk about what the 'New World' looks like post-Covid. One theme coming through strong is that some of us want to spend more time in our own communities. How can the future of public service delivery align and support this?

Read more from the Progressive Thinking series at www.psa.org.nz/ProgressiveThinking

