

Nundah Community Enterprises Co-operative

“We don’t employ people to work in our businesses...

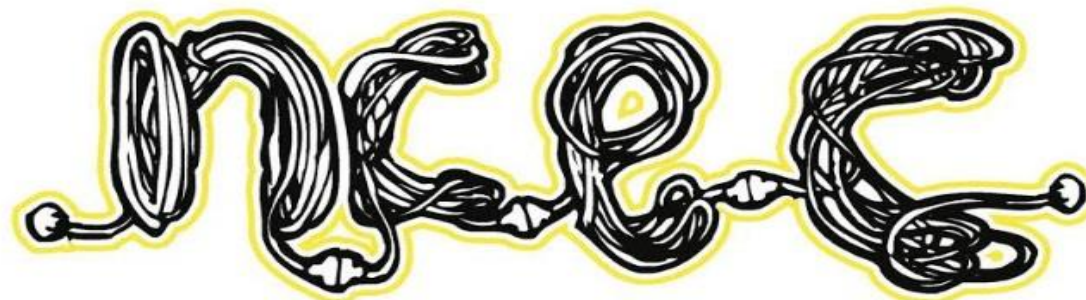
*We make our businesses **work** to employ people!”*

Les Halliwell Memorial Address

Queensland Community Development Conference 2019

Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative:

A story of *going* to the people, *listening* & *trusting* them to develop a response to challenges they face



Nundah Community Enterprises Co-operative

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgment of Country:

- Taurean Lea

Acknowledgment of organisers:

- CD QLD, Toowoomba Council, Sponsors

Acknowledgement of Student Support:

- Thank you to Social Work Masters students Shilpa Banerjee and Owen Turner who have assisted us in preparing this address



Introductions:

NCEC Members:

Susan Harbottle: *Café worker and Vessel Nundah Sales Assistant*

Taurean Lea: *Café Delivery Person*

Michael Cherry: *Café and Parks Worker and NCEC Director*

Ian Williamson: *Café worker and NCEC Director*

CLA / NCEC Community Workers:

Morrie O'Connor: *CLA Co-ordinator*

Richard Warner: *NCEC Co-ordinator*



Remembering Les Halliwell:

‘Go to the People, Listen to the People, Trust the People’

Co-op member’s spoke to people who knew and worked with Les and found out the following:

- Les was born in country Victoria and had a long career, passing away in 1977 aged 63
- He was a gentle and thoughtful man who loved telling stories
- Studied Community Development in England under Terrance and Madge Batten’s revolutionary – ‘non-directive approach’ – at the birth of Modern Community Development
- Worked mostly in Mackay, Rockhampton and Brisbane
- Did his Master thesis in Rockhampton on decision makers; found there were only three, for all the major events impacting people in the area!
- Involved in the establishing committees for: Relationships Australia, QCROSS, Inala Community House, Mackay Regional Council, Rockhampton Community Credit Group, Numerous Brisbane Community Centres, Social Planning UQ (acting head of school).
- As an academic built connections with UQ Ag Science Dept and worked on Co-operation in agricultural communities
- Believed in the ‘wisdom of the people’ and their ability to understand and work through the problems that faced them.
- Believed in listening to the less powerful and not being overly swayed by powerful voices
- Often met with great professional resistance - but lived what he believed
- Would remind those who worked for him to: *‘go to the people, listen to the people and trust the people’*



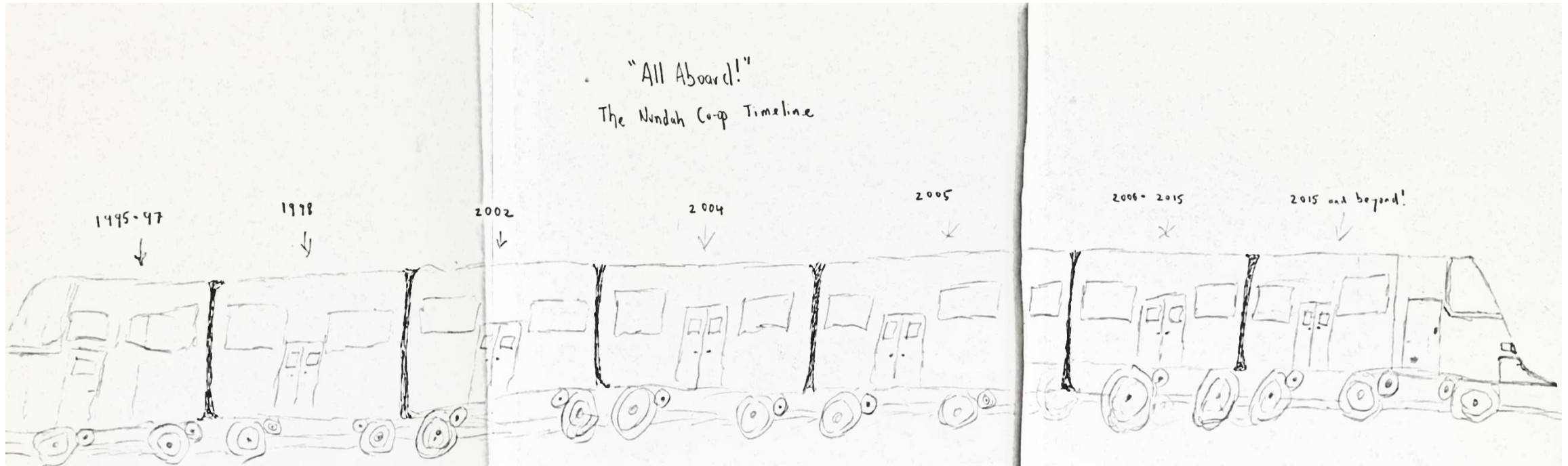
The Nundah Co-op Story



Pictured: Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative (NCEC) Parks and Mowing and Café and Catering teams.



All Aboard the Co-op Express! *a community timeline*



The Co-op Express by Ian Williamson

The beginning – listening to people's stories:

Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative (NCEC) was formed out of the aspirations of people with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues who desperately wanted to work but remained long-term unemployed. This population experience among the highest and most persistent unemployment of any in Australia. They had tried over and over to find a job - but it didn't feel like anyone was listening.



"I was always excited and hopeful at the start of each job and then shattered, angry and feeling lousy and useless at the end." (Craig)

1995-1997: *bringing people together*

In 1995 community workers in Nundah who had listened to a number of people with similar stories, suggested they meet to discuss the common issue of employment. A public meeting at the Nundah Neighbourhood Centre and the group were joined by volunteers from the centre who wanted to help. This new group decided to work together and form their own *people's organisation* creating meaningful employment for people with disabilities.

Over the next couple of years they:

- Built relationships with each other and the local community
- Experimented with different types of work
- Explored models of employment creation



1998

Foundation and Experimentation

In 1998 the eight people from this group decided to form their own workers co-op and Social Enterprise – the first of its type in Australia. A Co-op is a type of organisation set up around the needs of members and controlled by them. This model spoke to a group who had so often been in a position of having things done to them by others.

Over the next couple of years co-op members explored a series of employment creating projects such as:

- Yard mowing
- Card-making
- A veggie box delivery service

The group didn't wait for resources to begin this work but used those already at hand including:

- Their knowledge and skills
- Their connections and relationships
- Unused community resources such as the basement and backyard of the Forester's Community Finance building - just around the corner from the Neighbourhood centre on Wood St

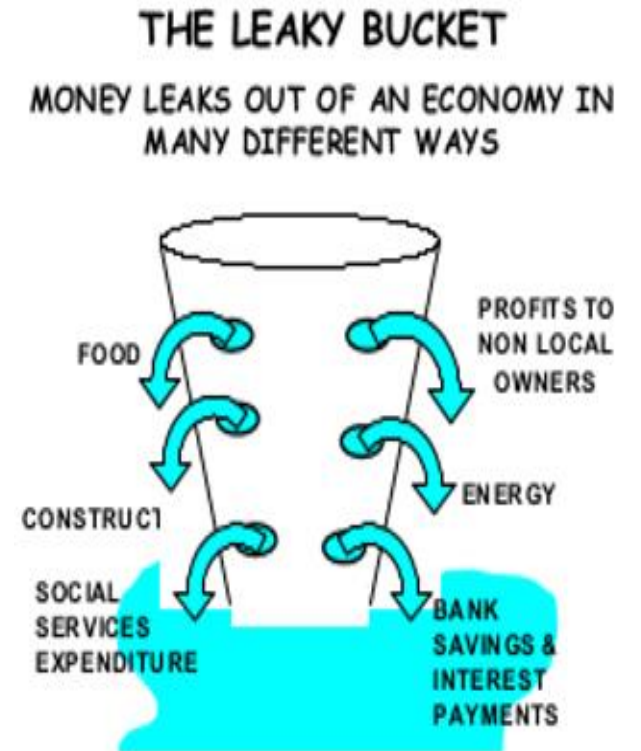
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Building a Strong Community Economy by *“Plugging the Leaks”*

Lots of money and resources come into a community but much also flows out leaving little long-term benefit. In our start-up phase we focused our gaze on resources ‘leaking out’ of the community and then attempted to ‘plug the leaks’. This included:

- Local Parks that Council were paying a large Multi-National Corporation to mow.
- Local Businesses and Charities that were purchasing from caterers outside of the local community
- Job service providers and training companies receiving significant incomes but not achieving real & substantive long-term outcomes for NCEC members
- Rent going to private landlords
- Pay-day lenders exploiting people on low incomes



2001/2002 *Establishment*



NCEC members mow their first park!

Around 2001/2002 the group participated in a local government planning process and asked if they could be paid to mow two small parks. This led to the first Social Procurement in Australia. Now the group mow more than 50 parks for council and the program has spread to more than 20 other social enterprises in Brisbane.

The co-op also employed its first paid coordinator David Langdon in this year - a former social work student with a business background - whose task was to work with co-op members and help grow the business to create meaningful work opportunities for members

2004: *Next Steps*



With the parks business successful in 2004 the Co-op responded to the requests of those members who did not want this type of work.



After some deliberation, Co-op members chose to open a new business - Australia's first Social Enterprise Café: 'Espresso Train Café and Catering. The site of Espresso Train was an old pizza restaurant which had been turned into a community meeting room by Community Living Association (CLA Inc) a local disability support organisation who allowed the co-op to take-on the underutilised space.



The co-op also received it's first major government grant in 2004 which was for rent for a number of years for a parks depot. Rather than paying a private landlord, the Co-op members partnered with Foresters Community Finance and Community Living Association to buy a community property – securing a long-term community asset.



ESPRESSO TRAIN
cafe and catering

Ethical, Local, Seasonal, Social

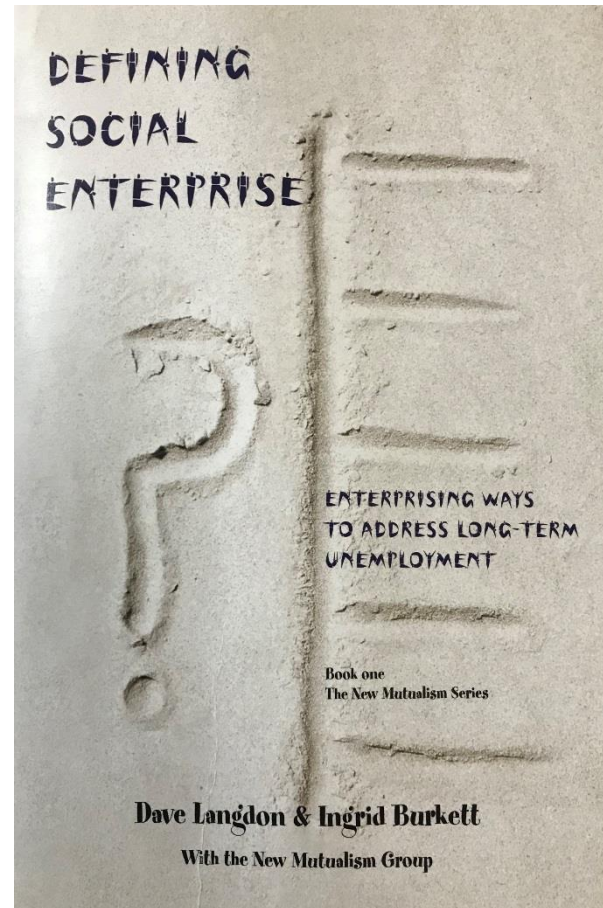
espressotrainingcatering.com.au

(07) 3260 7414



2005

Sharing the model



In 2005 the co-op started to document what it knew and build relationships with other communities on the same journey.

The Co-ops first publication was its story and framework: 'Participation and Production: A Resource for Community Enterprise' written by John Hooper.

It also worked alongside emerging social enterprises forming the 'New Mutualism Group' which is now the Queensland Social Enterprise Council (QSEC) the first peak body for social enterprise in Australia.

This group with Dr Ingrid Burkett published the first books on Social Enterprise and Social Procurement in Australia paving the way for development of this new way of addressing market failure and complex social and environmental issues.

2005-2015: Consolidation and Growth

This decade was a period of consolidation and growth. In this time NCEC:

- Grew its parks work to more than 50 public parks and the local streetscape in Nundah Village
- Received a Paul Newman grant, allowing refurbishment of café space and purchase of vehicles
- More than doubled its café and catering trade and opened Sundays
- Doubled employment opportunities for members with disabilities.
- Opened itself to external research, documenting the social impact on members and the local community
- A milestone for the co-op was when founding members started to achieve paid long service leave!
- Supported other community enterprises to develop, including a community of refugees from Bhutan who had been unemployed in the five years since they had been in Australia.
- Started a new food trailer and events business 'the Good Food Project'
- Invested in a 20kw rooftop solar farm halving its carbon footprint and saving many thousands of dollars p.a.
- Was awarded Australia's Best Social Enterprise (2015)



Some Migrant-Led and Social Enterprise Businesses NCEC has supported

"All people are entrepreneurs - but they don't often have the opportunity to find out"

(Dr Muhammad Yunus:, founder of Grameen Bank)

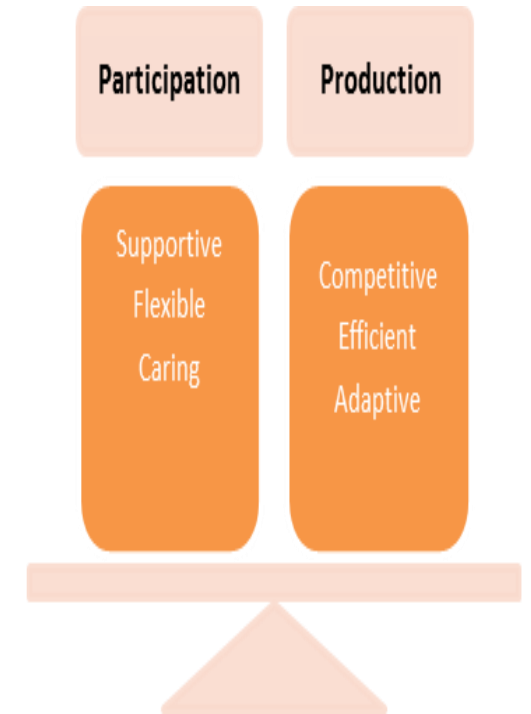


Operating Framework: *‘Participation and Production’*

NCEC has a primary purpose to create meaningful work for members with a disability.

As a cooperative enterprise which chooses to derive the majority of its income from trade, NCEC must balance the twin goals of *‘member participation’* and *‘business productivity’*.

“Participation and Production : A Resource for Community Enterprise” free e-book available @ ncec.com.au



Building People's Capacity - Brick by Brick.

NCEC started humbly but built capacity by looking to four key areas:

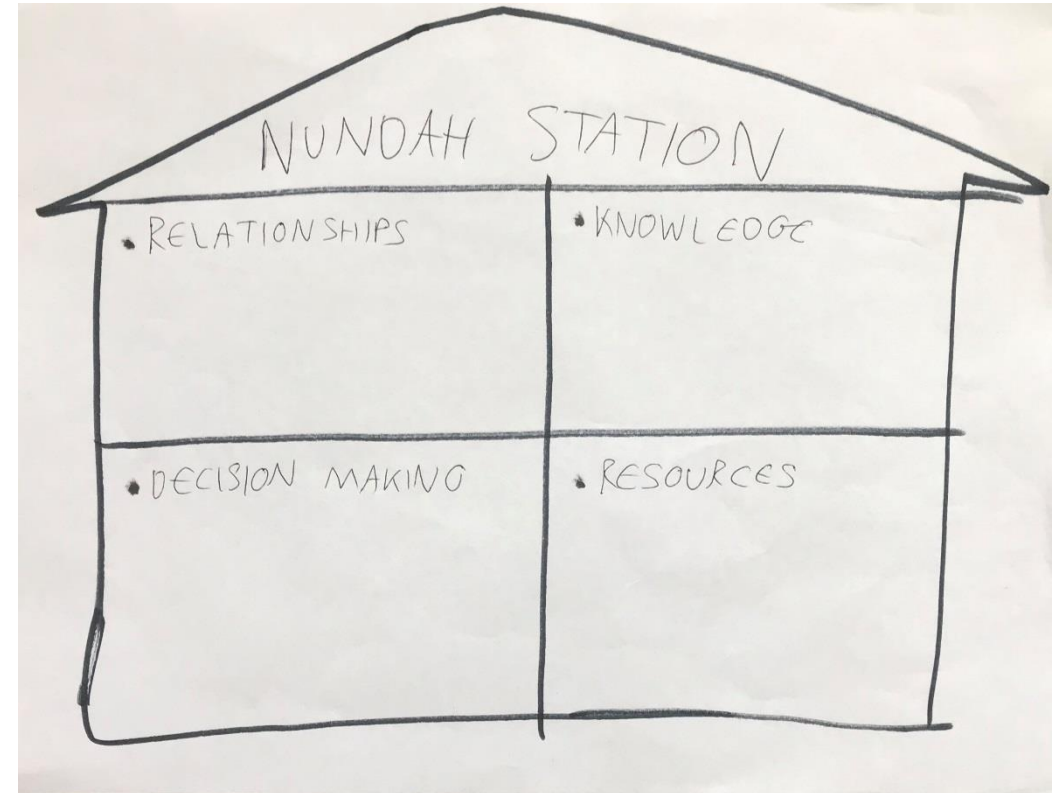
Relationships: e.g. What relationships do we already have and how can they be strengthened? What new relationships do we need?

Knowledge: What knowledge do we already have and what new knowledge do we need? ((e.g. cultural, technical, industry, business, financial knowledge etc)

Resources: What resources do we already have and what new resources do we need (e.g. financial, assets, equipment, materials etc)

Decision Making: How do we make decisions and why? Where could we improve decision making in the co-op to improve our member focus, business capacity and/or community involvement.

The 'cement' in all of this are our values (next slide)



Picture by Taurean Lea (framework by Conchetta Benn)

NCEC Values: *holding it all together*

- **Clarity of purpose:** a core commitment to long-term employment of members with a disability.
- **Ownership:** 'We built it' and 'it is our co-op', 'what we say goes'.
- **Mutuality:** the co-op helps members but the members have a role to play in helping the co-op
- **Listening:** deep listening to member's with disability and especially those who have been forgotten about or misunderstood
- **Gentleness:** being friendly, kind and respectful to each other
- **Caring for community and environment:** reaching out beyond the co-op to help others and the planet
- **Enterprise:** making sure our businesses work
- **Fun and Celebration:** celebrating achievements and time together



2016-2019

Revisiting our roots

As time passed and we gained a greater level of professionalism as an enterprise there was also some awareness that the co-op was at risk of becoming just another workplace. To this end we:



- Reconnected with our Co-operative and mutual roots



- Revisited our rules ensuring the place of members with intellectual disability and ensuring majority representation on the board of Directors



- Invested in relationship building and education of members as to the story of the co-op - primarily through forming of a speaker's group and monthly members meetings



- Engaged in an action research project with Academics Dr Peter Westoby and Dr Lynda Shevellar (published in 2017)



- Maintained a degree of independence by diversifying contracts (gaining of our first corporate contract) and choosing not to be reliant on grants and refusing to apply for those that did not align with our member centric vision.

Local people looking after their Local Shopping Centre - our first corporate partnership with Mirvac Toombul



Why a Community Enterprise?

The majority of NCEC members had made repeated attempts to gain supported or open employment in the past without success.

Controlling their own successful business has given them long-term work as well as a say and influence around job design, workplace culture and a sense of ownership (i.e. 'that this is our place').

There's been a fundamental shift from 'customer or recipient' to '***participant and producer***'.



N.C.E.C. members report significant improvements in health and well being, due to having:

- A valued role
- Meaningful use of time
- Improved personal finances
- A sense of ownership.



Learnings for Community Worker's

C.D. can be a powerful method of addressing complex disadvantage and uniquely suited to those without power - it can begin with the relationships and resources at hand.

-Mid-size organisations are ideally suited to the work - being small enough for local people to have a role and share of responsibility - whilst being large enough to have an impact on the problem at hand

Not having the voice of the people at the center of the work is like driving a car blindfolded: it would be pure luck to get where you wanted to go and you're likely to cause harm in the process

An unconscionable problem and commitment by people to address it is the engine-room of a development process - more valuable than any other contribution including \$

If we don't work in ways that build ownership of a problem and cede a level of control to the people affected by it, how else will they address the root causes of their exclusion?



“The powerlessness of poverty is not redeemed by consultation or participation, but by actual control over life decisions. The missing term in the manifesto of nations is community”

Ella Bhatt

Founder of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Global Elder.

Les Halliwell Memorial Address 2009



Some difficult questions for the future:

Difficult Questions for the future...

- [1] How does the Co-op in Alinsky's words resist '*organisational arterosclerosis*'?
- [2] Can you only retain member ownership if you remain small, *and* if you grow are there ways of retaining member ownership?
- [3] How do you remain flexible enough to deal with external change and threat?
- [4] How do you manage generational transition?



How to Begin...

The thousand kilometre journey starts with a single step - don't just wait give it a go!

Some thoughts:

- Start small but think big!
- Start with who and what you know
- Build relationship with each other and an identity, a sense of community and team-work
- Define your core –purpose / reason for being this is the fire that drives a community business
- Identify economic opportunities that match with members abilities and needs
- Trial / Experiment on small scale (its ok to fall down as long as you can get up again)
- Build capacity by looking to relationships, resources, knowledge and decision making
- When ready develop formal strategic or business plan



The Nundah business model

Primary Impact

> 8,000 hours employment annually to people with a disability

Provide meaningful employment for people with an intellectual disability / mental health issue

1. Espresso Train Café & Catering

- Catering business and café serving the community
- 10 year operation employing 11 people with disability with 5.8% annual turnover growth
- Recent expansion into a food truck service

2. Parks and Maintenance

- Garden maintenance for councils / community housing
- 15 year operation employing 10 people with disability with 5.9% annual turnover growth
- Partnerships with Brisbane City Council / Mental Illness Fellowship of Queensland

Wider community impact

Support to wider social enterprises through training / partnerships

Micro business support

Support 3 – 5 individuals annually excluded from open / supported employment (eg difficulty in working with others)

- Business advice
- Administration support
- Access to markets

Refugee / asylum support

Transition to open market place via partnerships with funded training programs

- Access to staff / industry expertise
- Real work ventures
- Start up advice / placements

Horizontal scaling

Share the model to help other like minded organisations grow

- Shared the model with "Seed social enterprises", Lagoon Creek Function Centre, Mountain Mowing Men
- Partner - Queensland University of Technology / Queensland Social Enterprise Council

Outcome

Long term social benefits to individuals / communities

Nundah's work in the local community and beyond has had a wide spread impact

- **Direct relief of poverty** and a **measurable reduction** in use of mental health support services
- Development of a **sense of identity, stability and safety in belonging** to a community
- Increased **personal wellbeing**
- Development of a sense of **identity, stability and safety** in belonging to a community



Selected Resources:

- Recent action research on NCEC titled 'The Possibility of Cooperatives'
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09687599.2019.1594699?af=R&journalCode=cdso20>
- 'Get Mutual' Co-op Builder Website with Case studies etc
<https://www.getmutual.coop/>
- NCEC Website with free story of Nundah Co-op "Participation and Production a resource for community enterprise" on "Publications Page"
www.ncec.com.au
- A leading international people's cooperative/social enterprise the Self Employed Women's Association <http://www.sewa.org/>

