

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

In Conversation with Kerry Jones
Season 4, Episode 9
Podcast Transcript

Speaker 1 We would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose land this podcast was produced and pay our respects to their elders past and present. We would also like to acknowledge the commitment and sacrifice of First Nations people in the preservation of country and culture. This was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Scotia: Welcome to Creative Responders in Conversation. I'm Scotia Monkovitch from the Creative Recovery Network and this is our monthly interview series where we hear from creative leaders, disaster management experts, artists and community members who are strengthening disaster through creativity. Today, I'm pleased to share with you my conversation with Kerry Jones from the Australian Centre for Social Innovation, or TACSI, as it's known. I had the chance to sit with Kerry whilst she was in Meanjin Brisbane recently for the Australian Disaster Resilience Conference. The theme for this year's conference was Resilience Reimagined. And Kerry was here to present the programme of work she's been leading at TACSI that is enabling communities to lead their own disaster response systems through a model of engagement called Now Future. How. This work is built around the philosophy that when it comes to building resilient communities, the answers lie within the communities themselves. I'm really interested to hear more about this model and the way it is designed to set communities up for success in approaching collective decision making and leading their own change. Please enjoy my conversation with Kerry Jones.

Scotia: Welcome to Creative Responders. Kerry.

Kerry: Thank you.

Scotia: I begin by acknowledging that we are sitting actually face to face today, which is a real pleasure in these in conversations we're normally online. So, so nice to see you in presence and we're on the country of the Yaggera Turrbal People here in Meanjin in Brisbane and we acknowledge their elders past and present and interestingly met a few of the new future leaders such a great pleasure to have them as part of this conference which we are together here in region. So you're here for that conference, the Australian Disaster Resilience Conference, where you presented yesterday in your role as Director of Systems Initiatives at the Australian Centre for Social Innovation or TACSI as we'll refer to it. I'd love to get into the details of the work you presented yesterday, but before we do that, for listeners who may not be familiar with the work of TACSI. Can you tell us a bit about the organisation and and how you came to be part of this great work?

Kerry So we're a team of people that come from all sorts of backgrounds and disciplines and as an organisation our focus is to bring people, community organisations, policymakers, philanthropists together to really tackle the tough social challenges we face as a society and to really think about, but also take actions towards the future that we really want.

Scotia It's interesting to use the word innovation within the context of people and culture, because as people and cultures we're always innovating. Really, that's part of how we feed and look back at history, but also into the future. So it's an interesting choice of word. Where do you think that's how do you understand that in the context of the work?

Kerry I think it's about the intentionality and often, I guess from where we are in society and our roles where, yeah, we are always innovating, but it's about perhaps bringing together people who don't normally come together on them and getting very different perspectives and experiences, which we see creates very different solutions and responses to some challenges. And if we did have all the answers, then perhaps we wouldn't have some of the challenges we have today. So we see that there is a need for social innovation if we are going to create the future we want. And our ideal, our mission as an organisation is to not have to exist. That would be ideal. But currently with where we're at, especially in Australia, we've got a role to play. Hmm.

Scotia That's a great thinking, isn't it? To think of working towards your end in a way so that you no longer necessary. That's really the basis of community arts. Culture development, practice within support will hold or care for communities until we're not needed because the the power and the capacity or capabilities are grown in that process for people to continue on their own pathways.

Kerry That's right.

Scotia Yes. The theme of this year's conference has been resilience reimagined. And yesterday you presented about the Now Future How model for strengthening community resilience. This is a program you've been leading for some time now, and it's centred around enabling communities to lead their own disaster response systems in that way of leaving legacy for growth into the future. Can you describe a bit about the background of the project and how this as an initiative came about?

Kerry Yes, so we have been working with communities on a range of areas. But there was a philanthropist, Paul Ramsay Foundation, and their partners who really wanted to do something genuinely helpful in response to the 2019-20 bushfires.

Scotia Can I ask what you mean by genuinely helpful?

Kerry Well, they paused. They didn't just give relief funds they wanted to understand for the longer term how do we need to come up alongside community to help them lead their own change? That's where they were coming from. And so they brought a range of partners together. And so we worked with them to connect out to community and

understand what was happening at the time, what was working and what wasn't, and what was that they were going to need for the longer term. And that's how the Now Future How model started to develop. And that led to the Ramsay Foundation setting up an initiative called Fire to Flourish.

Scotia So the work you've been doing, like where was the trajectory for you into it?

Kerry Me personally. Well, I've been working with TACSI for ten, nearly ten years now, and the range of the work that I've led has been looking at not just services and solutions, but what does it mean to really change the root causes of what's going on or getting in the way? Mentoring, doing a lot of work with community, particularly in mental health and community led responses to mental health. So that was part of what brought me to it. So I was pulled into the work because of that. Also, I personally went through our little village, had to evacuate through the 2019-20 bushfires. So that firsthand experience.

Scotia Gives you a very different insight, doesn't it?

Kerry Very different insight.

Scotia Yes. So the work you've been doing in these communities, can you step us through what that on ground community engagement looks like, And how the Now Future How model has evolved as a result of this work?

Kerry Yeah, look, it certainly came about by one of the things we sought to do first to understand what was really needed was to find the leaders that don't normally come forward first. And so we spoke to people in communities that have been affected by the bushfires and said, who are you seeing that is taking different responses and working really hard for your community's recovery? And so we actually connected our I guess we would call it the unusual suspects, the people that people don't normally go to who are, as you described earlier on in the introduction, you know, in response, innovating as they go. And so we wanted to learn about what it took for them to do that and what were the barriers they were facing. And we worked with them to host conversations in their community. And it's their input that helped shape this really important work of story and that the stories of now and like really looking at the strengths, what was the good things that were happening? Because often there's a big focus in recovery efforts on what's missing, what's not working, but what was working. How could more of that happen? So that opportunity to really understand where are we now and our own potential as a community. And then that really sets the foundations for how to talk about the future. And that's where actually having space for creativity, for imagination to think about possibilities of future have to start with knowing first what your potential is.

Scotia Mm and what your own place is.

Kerry Yeah, and sense of actually there's things we can do here and that builds that feeling of hope and possibility that then part of that was also conversations about, well, if this is the future we want, how do we start working towards that? And what happens in a

lot of our work, especially our response to disasters, is there's lots of funds and supports that flow and actually work often can be quite siloed and people spend a lot of effort trying to source the resources or the funding they need. And so you have to get very fixed on it's this idea or this and you have to compete.

Scotia Yeah the process, entrenches you in a particular direction.

Kerry Yeah, it is about the now, like what are our strengths, Where are our potential thinking and getting that basis to be able to think and stretch into the future. But then talk about how do we do that and how do we do that together. I was talking about those silos and that competitive nature of how things try to flow quickly to the ground in response to disaster and there isn't the space to talk about that. So you have very sort of fixed projects or ideas that get put up for grants. And, you know, we we had about one region where through the disaster resilience funding, 84 projects were funded in that region. They didn't know about one another and what one another were doing. Often it was trying to draw on the same people to be involved or it was the same people playing roles in leading it. And that's a lot of projects to run at once over 12 months in a community that is in a recovery phase.

Scotia And I can only imagine the exhaustion, the overlay of exhaustion, which it's interesting, isn't it? Like I was reflecting on that idea this morning of that energy that comes. It's kind of very seductive energy after disaster where communities are really identifying the strength of relationships, that survival from honeymoon phase and how what is it that we do through this work that can hold that so it doesn't dissipate because then all the weight and you were saying earlier, the negativity, the view we've always seen the black rather than the colour in these processes starts to be the full focus.

Kerry Yes.

Scotia And so in order to find your strength and place can lift you out of that, or how do we do that in a continuum so we don't have to drop?

Kerry Yeah, I think it is important to note, though, that that level of energies and it's not sustainable.

Scotia No, no, I don't assume that at all. But it's a kind of sense like what do you take if we're thinking about the gems that are given us in these extraordinary experiences?

Kerry Yes.

Scotia What is it that we recognise in that that we hold on a daily basis? Yeah. Just kind of your now isn't it. Yes.

Kerry Now what, what are our strength and faced with this situation that we're in. What are those strengths that have come to the fore? What is that innovation we did on the run and really explore that. And so taking that real strength based view is also important part of

working with trauma, not just the trauma of the event that's just happened, but the compounding traumas that have happened over time. And I think I mentioned yesterday that there was an Indigenous leader, who, when I was talking to them about the work and where we're going or working together, they said "Slow haste. Slow haste."

Scotia Yeah, that's such a beautiful term.

Kerry And so it is something about how we keep an eye to the urgency that we might feel during those times in response in that recovery phase but really working at a pace that is sustainable and being able to have that space to think about the longer term and then come back to what are the important shorter term actions we're taking now, how do we prioritise the energy that we have, How do we ...

Scotia That's so important isn't it because otherwise it becomes overwhelming, this sense of reaching to something that seems so possible but so far away

Kerry Yeah, I mean a number of the communities we've worked with across the nation often talk about the time, which is about this 18 month window after that initial recovery response where a range of that heightened level of activity and flow of funds and services can often be a cliff. I can often just like cut off or fade out, but relatively quickly. They talk about that chance to take a breath and regather. And I think we've seen actually what was important some of this now future, how work was to be ready at that time where people had the chance to take a breath, but then began to think about what next? Hmm.

Scotia So it hasn't stopped. There is still a continuum. Yeah. You talk about the idea of a principles led approach that sort of evolves around the work. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Kerry It really is about values and mindsets, but also really explicit behaviours that we expect of one another and how we're doing this work together. And I know you often can hear, and even I heard yesterday around communities who are doing incredible things, but there's camps or divisiveness still going on in the community where there hasn't been that opportunity to say, actually what are our shared principles here? The way we expect to work together, the mindsets that are important to us that actually embrace the fact that we are different and we do have different views and ideas and how can we bring that together? And without a sense of that becoming a tension.

Scotia Or a competition.

Kerry Or a competition.

Scotia As you said before, a lot of the systems for support put you in a position of competition, which is really unfortunate way of navigating collaboration.

Kerry It is.

Scotia And so maybe if the 84 projects actually combined into three, you might get better weight.

Kerry Yes. Yeah. Or at least seeing them, we often talk about it as those projects being seen as an ecosystem. So actually, of the 84, which are the three or four that have priority now and the ones that come next door actually, can you connect those projects and ideas up into larger, longer term work together? What I mean about principle led approach really being about a grade mindsets and values and behaviours. The process of agreeing that collective process is really important and someone from the audience yesterday made the observation that they are imposing principles. These are great principles and they bring them and they impose them. And so I find principles don't work as well when people haven't had that ownership in shaping them and working that stuff out together. And when you do do it together and you see the different views and perspectives and you come to the things that you going to agree on, they become really important tools for decision making, for problem solving, for actually safely saying, you know what, that wasn't in line with.

Scotia Well, it'll become the touchstone for everyone don't they.

Kerry They do become the touchstone for everyone. It's really critical.

Scotia So the storytelling, the future thinking process that you use, that's a key component of how you fed those principles and how the model has evolved. I really loved how you talk about the intrinsic or the necessary role of imagination and therefore this notion of hope. It's something that we at the Creative Recovery Network really advocate strongly, and I think it's a real tool that creative processes bring in to this kind of work, that idea of shifting your mind into a imaginative space in order to be able to see possibility. And that, in essence, is hope. So I wonder if you could share your insights from what you saw on the ground using these processes and the methodologies that you used and and how you saw the idea of living in that imagination was being effectual.

Kerry I think it really starts with time and space. And so the thing that we heard a lot is that a lot of processes really don't create time and space and they can be quite structured, often use particular tools and I think tools can be really valuable and we use tools to get imagination and creativity happening. But what's so critical is the time and space and to really sit with, yeah, that chance to stretch yourself out of where you are right now and often that's permission giving that goes on for yourself. And even you can help one another, like permission to just be a bit more playful or it's okay to let go of that thing that you've been advocating for for the last ten years and just Yeah, let's play with that over here. Or, you know, I saw a group I love this where someone put their idea on the table and gave the whole group permission to pull it apart, rearrange it, make it something else, add things to it. And that was just so powerful for that group. And yeah, and then everyone started putting their ideas on the table. Once they saw that experience and it took someone in the group to say, You know what, I'm going to step into the bravery.

Scotia [00:19:01] I was about to say it's a very brave action. And it's interesting because I think one of the challenges that face us in the future but particularly in the disaster management sector, is capacity to be brave like that and to trust each other to hold our roles or hold our responsibilities in a way that can shift them. And if we don't have those safe places where people can be vulnerable, it's going to be very hard to shift the systems that we have that are, we realise, not really functional, certainly not going to be functional into the future.

Kerry [00:19:32] Yes.

Scotia [00:19:32] And that sounds to me like your framework now future and how is trying to set up safe places for people to reimagine. Can you talk a bit about that? Because I think it's a really important tool, like how do we start to offer those spaces, particularly for the diversity of people who are involved in disaster management that have very distinct roles that are pretty unmanageable now.

Kerry [00:19:56] Yeah, And I think the key is that those safe spaces, it doesn't have to be all people coming in to a workshop together like yeah, that's one way. And that could be part of a suite of ways when we get to that space where people have that bravery, that imagination and creativity are really important part of the "Now" stage is to go out and listen quite differently to a community and so I think that opportunity to go and sit in spaces and build that trust with others and also with the people you're coming back together with, so all that trust building then leads to that opportunity to do what I described before about the idea on the table in a workshop. But for people to go back out to the people they've been listening to and explore ideas with them and get into creative processes on the on the front porch.

Scotia [00:20:52] And listening quite differently. Is that what you mean? Like how how do you you know, because that's a term like listening quite differently. What, what does that mean?

Kerry [00:21:01] Yeah. So it means going and knowing what you think about things and being able to put that in the background and having ways to have discussions and ask questions that made you discover new things and to sit and really let people talk rather than a sense of we have to get to an outcome here or a purpose here that our dear colleague Aunty Vicky Charles often talks about the role of yarning in Indigenous culture, and she says, You know, what you need to do is go and have a yarn, but with a purpose. And that purpose is connecting, learning, understanding, building trust. And then that's going to get us towards the things we might do together. But you start there.

Scotia [00:21:53] Yeah. And going back to what you said earlier, the value or the true investment of time to enable that to happen.

Kerry [00:21:59] Yes

Scotia [00:22:02] Yeah, it's a challenge, isn't it, when I think about that in the big picture, and maybe that's an interesting question to ask in terms of where you feel in this work is heading. Because you how long have you been how long has it been rolling out?

Kerry [00:22:15] We've it's been well, I mean, the first conversations were happening probably four or five months after the bushfires.

Scotia [00:22:24] So so we were kind of sitting in a time it's a little like people maybe having that breathing space now, maybe, But also there's this sense of impending stress in our time because we don't have a we have an unstable future ahead. We can't really predict where we're going. And certainly some of those communities are feeling that new seasonal weight approaching in a very quick fashion. So we have the necessity of time, but we're very time poor in terms of our future projections. So how is that being managed in the project and the thinking about future directions?

Kerry [00:23:00] Yeah, it comes a little bit back to that slow haste concept. So like the next layer of that is it can feel like it's taking a long time in that trust, an early stage, but actually that helps things come lighter, move quicker. And so what we tend to do in our more white construct of how the world works is we put urgency and pace upfront. And actually what we can learn deeply from our Indigenous colleagues is if you do that, that slow starting pace, then things will flow and they'll be more efficient in, you know, white language, they'll be more efficient, they'll be more effective. The energy will go in the right places because you've done that slower work and deeper work upfront.

Scotia [00:23:48] And your creative juices are flowing. I know that you're working a lot with the First Nations communities of the Countries that you're working on. There's a lot of referencing always around this notion of healing country, healing self, or that deep connection of health and trauma and wellbeing that sits within a bigger picture really. And you referred to ecologies before. It's a kind of a broader sense of how we sit into an ecology rather than something that's very centralised to the human. So how is that feeding in your work or how do you see that shaping the practice that you're developing?

Kerry [00:24:24] One of the principles by or philosophies by which the Now Future How model works is around connection to Country and seeing Country as a participant so it really starts to lift out from the human into the greater that there is actually participation in Country. I saw that beautifully through two ways, which I mentioned yesterday, both online and in-person and the online. It was during COVID time and the people who were coming together, they would all acknowledge the Countries they were coming from. But what they'd noticed about that country that day and the indigenous people in that group would then build on that with a story about that Country. And so people started to learn things from country, even though they are in an online environment. And that really shaped the ideas, the things I prioritised, the relationships they then went out and be able to make. Community. And then I saw also in person group had been working together over over three months. And every time they came together for their intensive work, I would spend a whole hour on Country. And people from that country would guide them. Sometimes it was silent. I'd point things out, they'd tell stories, and people really got a deep understanding

about that Country's spirit and what it brings. And thinking about that in what it was that they were going to do together. So yeah, I think that it is we can't be a resilient society or a resilient community without that deep connection between Indigenous people, non-Indigenous people, and to really learn from the Countries we have the privilege to live on.

Scotia [00:26:14] And so where, where do you see it heading? Where where are these communities going in this next phase of the work.

Kerry [00:26:21] Part of the Now Future How model is helping people I guess see that it's not just a plan now.

Scotia [00:26:30] Yes.

Kerry [00:26:31] And that we'd call it adaptive, like, you know, plans change and evolve and they need to, with everything new that we learn or context that changes around us, whatever that next disruption is going to be that's happening in our community. And what I've seen actually in the Our Town initiative, where we're working on communities in South Australia, is that ability to have had those strong foundations, what the principles are that guide them, that they're like the root things are really wanting to work on and change the big vision they're working towards and the people who know how they want to work together. It's those things that help them navigate what ever that disruption is that's come into their community. And the recent floods in the Murray, the Riverland has certainly we've seen those communities respond quite differently to that recent disruption because of that work that they've been doing together. So yeah, I guess that's where I see it heading. And then what I see in those communities who've done these processes is their being able to say more clearly to others who want to come in and help or are coming in to respond or wanting to help with a new knowledge that they're able to say where they stand and how they want to work and what they already know and what's going to be valuable to them. And that shift in power. We talk about power shifts all the time, but that's it in in action, where they say, Oh, that's fantastic that you have that to offer. But that's not what we're needing right now. What we need right now is this could you tweak that or do you know someone else who could offer this? And seeing communities have the confidence to say that rather than this sense that people are just going to come in and do what they want anyway.

Scotia [00:28:25] A sense of self-determination in their choices. And so we at the conference here and in some ways these gatherings is a pretty big gathering of a lot of people. It's an opportunity to escalate those voices or find platforms that can kind of pick up some of the trajectories that you're trying to evolve or the language changes or the frameworks of reference. Have you found any kind of key moments here for yourself, or how do you see these kind of spaces as a way to take your work forward? Because we invest in these gatherings, you know, and you know, the question of lies or what happens where the actions that come out of these public interfaces and in some ways for the role of culture and the arts, it happens in small, quiet places like you've been talking about in the yarning circle or in that community engaged practice. But there really is a need for us to

scale that up so that we can be influential in terms of structuring policies and planning so that there's more opportunities or that that becomes a guiding light for policy and planning. Where do you see this work sitting in that it's the more systems change kind of thinking, yeah, from a, from a politicised space rather than a community space.

Kerry [00:29:43] Yeah. If I bring it to life with a real thing that I'm going to follow, I think one of the exciting connections for me was I co-presenter in the time when I presented who comes from an investment and an economic perspective and they were referencing a place, place view and we're talking about coming together with our perspectives and expertise and exploring what does that really mean? How do we truly bring what seems like very different skillsets together? So I'm pretty excited by that. And I listened to Jerry's opening keynote this morning and he was talking about disruption and how he's had to reinvent himself as disruption is happening from that technology perspective. And that's certainly one I'm sitting with, too here is what the role of those technology disruptions that are coming like how does that actually help community be creative, lead the way. Yeah, so that's the other one that I'm wanting to follow up.

Scotia [00:30:47] I think that one's fascinating, this idea, you know, in some ways what AI developments will give us is time because we won't have to do all of the kind of mundanity. So we will have more time and we'll have more volunteer time. And what does that mean for us in the future? And how do you shift from a very purpose based role a lot of our volunteers play in Disaster Management into something that's much more collective or more about heart connection rather than hose connection. So again, it's an extraordinary opportunity for us to really deepen practice like yours, isn't it?

Kerry [00:31:22] Yes, it really is. And so yeah, I think they're two examples of things that I, I think they'd be lateral from, you know, the practice that we bring to this space to connect up with those different ways of seeing the world and the and the future that's coming so.. mmm.

Scotia [00:31:40] So for you as a practitioner, there's such a privilege to work in this space, isn't it? What do you feel that you've grown for yourself in this development?

Kerry [00:31:49] Yeah, well, that's a great question because I've looked in lots of ways, I think, you know, work in an organisation dedicated to social innovation, people looking at ways and tools and possibilities and language changes that, you know, one of the greatest things to me is the grounding and humbling of experience working alongside community. And I love the moments where people say, I know you think that, but actually this is what I'm experiencing right now. Do you think I'm feeling this way? But I've actually, I feel this way.

Scotia [00:32:23] Don't make presumptions on my behalf.

Kerry [00:32:25] and, you know, and it doesn't matter how if you're a practitioner in this space, it's being able to be humble enough for those moments and to shift and change your assumptions alongside people, too. The other thing for me that's been really

significant in this work is the privilege and the learning I've had around what it means to be a real ally in working with Indigenous people and community. And I've learned about really supporting Indigenous leaders to lead for all community, not just for the Indigenous community and the challenges of that and how hard it is when to step away. When you think you're being a good ally and being able to hear the feedback that actually when you stood up against that racism actually took my voice away, was my role to do that. So to really learn from those moments and yes, I that's been a huge privilege for me. And in closing, just really acknowledge the people and the communities that we've had the privilege to work alongside, to learn from, to help contribute to the work that they're doing. And we wouldn't be having this conversation if it wasn't for their welcoming, their challenge and their storytelling and excitement around what they've achieved that we get to talk about that today.

Scotia [00:33:54] Oh, thank you. Thank you for sharing of the richness of those sharings and those stories.

Kerry [00:34:01] Thank you very much. It's been a privilege to have a conversation today.

Scotia [00:34:09] Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders in Conversation. And special thanks to Kerry for making the time to share her work. Check out the show notes of this episode for links to TACSI. There is a range of fantastic resources on their website and will also include links to some of Kerry's articles about the now future, how model and other pieces from her on community resilience. If you're new to this podcast, you might also be interested in listening to our documentary episodes where we deep dive into communities and projects that are harnessing the arts to strengthen disaster management. They're all in the Creative Responders podcast feed alongside these in conversation episodes. If you scroll back, you'll find them all. You can also find our full archive and transcripts and case studies related to each episode at our website, www.creativerecovery.net.au . This podcast is produced by me and my Creative Recovery Network colleague Jill Robson. Our sound engineer is Tiffany Dimmack, and our theme was composed by Mikey Squire. We'll be back next month with another conversation. Thanks for listening.