



‘They go into bat for me’

Morwell Neighbourhood House, the Hazelwood Mine Fire and Recovery

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Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the role played by the Morwell Neighbourhood House (MNH) in assisting with immediate and longer term processes of community recovery following the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire event. Neighbourhood Houses are expected to respond to the needs of their communities, usually achieved through provision of a range of social, educational, recreational and support activities delivered within a community development framework. While these activities and programs are core to the MNH, the impact of the Hazelwood mine fire on Morwell's communities required a very different approach and set of responses. Many Morwell residents believed they were not receiving adequate information from government agencies and the information they were receiving did not seem to reflect their experience. This dissonance between what they were being told and their experience led to distrust of, and for some a sense of being abandoned by, the authorities and agencies whose role was to support the community (Wood et al 2015).

Morwell Neighbourhood House became a key place in the community's recovery because

- It is perceived as a trusted source of information
- It is an advocate for vulnerable groups and individuals
- Its Coordinator, Tracie Lund, and Management Committee initiated and supported activities of recovery that enabled people to 'break out' of the victim role and to even feel like 'heroes'
- MNH has fostered social connection between people both within Morwell and beyond its borders
- MNH has initiated community conversation on future directions for the Morwell community and the Latrobe Valley more broadly

This Report was prepared through analysis of interviews with representatives of key stakeholders who were part of the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire response and recovery, the MNH Coordinator, members of the Committee of Governance, representatives from Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Morwell community members who attend MNH.

The key finding is that a Neighbourhood House can offer a significant space for recovery through processes based on empowerment and participation. The value of the Neighbourhood House must be seen in the context of its process and framework: a community-led, empowering and capacity-building framework, a commitment to listen to what people need and to work in partnership with them to achieve outcomes.

'They go into bat for me': Morwell Neighbourhood House, the Hazelwood Mine Fire and Recovery

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Introduction

In 2014 the town of Morwell in the Latrobe Valley was impacted by a fire in the Morwell open cut coal mine that burnt for 45 days. The most significant effects of the Hazelwood mine fire were felt by the community of Morwell, however, many other towns and communities in the Latrobe Valley were also affected by the event. The emergency response to the fire and subsequent recovery initiatives involved a multitude of government and community organisations. The staff and volunteers of Morwell Neighbourhood House (MNH) responded from the first day of the emergency providing information to its immediate neighbourhood community and the wider Morwell and Latrobe Valley communities. MNH was active throughout the emergency providing information and resources to the community and a platform for community voices to be heard. MNH has also been active in ongoing advocacy for the Morwell community, for example, facilitating an online petition to demand an inquiry into the health impacts of the mine fire, and in organising and running recovery initiatives for members of the community. This report is on the role of MNH in recovery from the Hazelwood mine fire, focusing on the transformation of the House's program and priorities, and two recovery initiatives: the Valley to Valley project (a project sending photos and messages of support from the Latrobe Valley community to the flood devastated Hunter Valley communities in New South Wales), and a public talk by Dr John Hewson (former Federal Liberal Party leader) on the transition from coal generated electricity and its implications for the Latrobe Valley. This report was prepared and written, for MNH, under the auspices of The Centre of Research for Resilient Communities (CoRC), Federation University Australia. The material and findings will also be used in other research reports and articles as part of a wider investigation into recovery from the Hazelwood mine fire and community wellbeing.

The event

On 9 February 2014, the town of Morwell in the Latrobe Valley was confronted with several bushfires which resulted in a fire at the Morwell open cut coal mine adjacent to the Hazelwood power station. This event became known as the Hazelwood mine fire (Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry, 2014). After 45 days, the mine was declared safe but smoke emissions continued for some time afterwards. The impact of the mine fire was felt across the Latrobe Valley and beyond,

but Morwell was most affected and at times ‘overwhelmed’ by smoke and ash (Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry, 2014, p.257).

The Hazelwood mine fire disaster was a different sort of disaster to, for example, a bushfire in that there was no physical infrastructure or building loss (apart from the mine and its infrastructure). Once the event was over and the smoke had dissipated, there was little physical evidence or reminder that it had happened, apart from coal dust and ash in houses, but even that is hidden from public view. There were no obvious or usual recovery activities to be undertaken by groups such as the Community Recovery Committee (CRC), more used to working with the aftermath of bushfires, as noted in the local council’s submission to the mine fire Inquiry:

... the mine fire event was quite unlike other fire events in that no community assets were lost, no homes were lost and there was little damage to social and community infrastructure. ... there has been no ‘traditional’ resilience work which has presented itself, such as the rebuilding of community halls, re-establishment of community walking tracks and paths ... (Latrobe City Council submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry 2015-2016)

The most significant effects on the community were not on material infrastructure and the associated personal and financial impacts; rather this was about loss of trust in government and authorities; feeling abandoned and unsupported as a community; and as to how the community sees itself and its future.

A note about community

Morwell is a town of 14,000 people and the Latrobe Valley has a population of over 74,000. Morwell and the wider Latrobe Valley community are diverse and the impacts on various groups within the community and their perceptions and experience of the Hazelwood coal mine fire are also diverse. Every community, including Morwell, is experienced differently by different people and groups. Community can inhabit multiple locations within a single town, for example, a street, neighbourhood, workplace, or sports club. People can belong to more than one community within a town as well as having a sense of belonging to the overall town community. As such there will be multiple and different perceptions and processes of recovery within a community as diverse and large as Morwell and even more so if the Latrobe Valley is included. There is no ‘a’ or ‘one’ recovery for the community just as there is no one sense of community. At times it can be difficult to delineate what part of the community people are referring to when they say ‘the community’. It is beyond the scope of this report to enter into the debate over how to define community generally and more specifically how to delineate the Morwell community. For the purpose of this report the term community may encompass the people who attend the MNH, the local neighbourhood surrounding MNH, east Morwell, Morwell and Latrobe Valley. In order to

manage the complexity around the term ‘community’, when this report refers to people who attend the House or reside in the immediate neighbourhood of MNH the term MNH community will be used. For all other groups within Morwell (and beyond) the term community or Morwell community will be used.

A note on Neighbourhood Houses

Neighbourhood Houses were established in Victoria in the 1970s. In 2015 there were 415 Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria; most (373) receive funding through the State Government Neighbourhood House Coordination Program (NHVic 2015). The aims and role of Neighbourhood Houses are to develop ‘vibrant, inclusive and connected communities through effective community development’ (NHVic 2016); they provide a range of social, educational, recreational and support activities within a community development framework. A community development approach is defined by Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan (2012:297;300) as:

a process that entails organisation, facilitation and action which allows people to establish ways to create the community they want to live in. It is a process that provides vision, planning, direction and co-ordinated action towards desired goals ... and respond[s] to changing needs and conditions

and

provide[s] residents with opportunities to develop capacities resulting in self-reliance and greater control over change in the community

Each Neighbourhood House responds to the needs of its community and so what is offered may vary between Houses. As a representative from Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (NHVic) (the peak body for the sector) said, ‘If you’ve visited one neighbourhood house, you’ve visited one neighbourhood house’. In 2015, 181,700 people visited a Neighbourhood House each week in Victoria. In a 2013 survey, people nominated the main benefits of visiting a Neighbourhood House as community connections, opportunities for participation and reducing social isolation (Savage & Perry 2014).

The Morwell Neighbourhood House commenced operations in Doolan Street Morwell in 1982, then moved to Symons Crescent in 1986 and finally to Beattie Crescent in 2005 . Tracie Lund, the current coordinator (a paid position), was appointed in 2012 and she works alongside a Committee of Governance whose members are all volunteers.

This report

The impetus for this report was the staging by MNH of a talk by Dr John Hewson on the topic of transition from coal for the Latrobe Valley. At that event Dr Hewson talked not just theoretically about transition from coal but put an actual project proposal to the Latrobe Valley

community to consider. That a Neighbourhood House was able to facilitate and organise such an event sparked my interest. I wanted to explore what had enabled MNH to be a player in such an arena and how MNH see its role in facilitating recovery from the Hazelwood mine fire.

Methods

In many ways this is a simple story – of enacting community-centred and directed community development, however its impacts and reverberations are powerful. Capturing these types of significant changes and impacts can be elusive; they usually do not fit easily into tick boxes and quantitative reporting mechanisms. Which box do you tick that indicates a sense of hope; a growing sense of having a voice and the confidence to use it? How do you measure a change in the ‘vibe’ of a community or a sense of belonging and community pride? The impacts and their importance can perhaps be best seen and understood through people’s stories. This report is based on the perceptions and stories of some significant people in the life of MNH. Their perspectives provide a way into that which is less easily and less often captured – the messiness, ephemerality and intangible nature of many of the important things that happen in the realm of community and people.

I already had a relationship with MNH through Tracie Lund, the co-ordinator, who I interviewed in 2014 about the experience of MNH during the mine fire and her perspective of the impacts on the community; and again in 2015 about the effectiveness of recovery activities. In 2016 the MNH hosted a participatory research project, in which I was involved, about community strengths and wellbeing as part of the Hazelwood Health Study. In preparing this report interviews have been conducted with: a member of the MNH Committee of Governance; representatives of the Neighbourhood House Association; a local councillor; a previous representative from the Gippsland Regional CFA; and a representative from Emergency Management Victoria (EMV). With their permission, I have also used interviews with participants in the participatory research project. The interviews conducted specifically for this report and those conducted with participatory research participants were used to create interview poems (see below). Interviews with Tracie Lund conducted in 2014 and 2015 and material from a ‘diary’ of the event that Tracie wrote in 2014 have been used to inform the report but have not been used to create interview poems.

There are many ways to analyse and represent data from interviews. The interviews for this project were transcribed and then analysed thematically. A second phase of analysis and representation used an approach sometimes called poetic transcription, found poetry or scanned lines. In brief it is about taking the words of participants, paring them back or distilling them and presenting them in a poem-like format rather than in a prose format or as verbatim quotes. It is

not trying to be poetry but uses some of the formatting and structure of poetry – white space, short lines, spoken rhythms – to relook at the interviews. It opens another way of seeing and interpreting the data (Leavey 2009; Faulkner 2005) and provides a powerful avenue for accessing and re-presenting the emotional impact as expressed by interview participants.

MNH and its role during the Hazelwood Mine Fire Event

The Neighbourhood House,
it became
a beacon of hope
during a very dark period
for the Valley
We had never had a fire
so close to us as a town before

Things weren't done properly
for Morwell
on so many levels with that fire
But the Neighbourhood House
became
a beacon of hope
by being a place
that you could go to,
to get answers
about the current situation
it could reassure you
(Participatory research participant)

As the poem above illustrates, during the mine fire, MNH played a crucial role in disseminating information to the community, advocating for the community and in seeking answers to community concerns. On 9 February 2014 staff and volunteers at MNH used social media to alert residents to the fire and its progress. The next day the House was closed but staff called all residents on the MNH database to check on them. On 19 February MNH held its first community information session. Forty people attended and Tracie noted: 'Concerned residents made it clear they were looking for more information on the health side effects of the ongoing situation with the fires' (TL Diary excerpts, 2014). MNH continued to hold weekly information sessions at which representatives from the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), Environmental Protection Agency, Latrobe City Council, Department of Human Services, and local councillors and state MPs attended (not necessarily everybody at every session). Tracie and the MNH Committee of Governance believed this was an important role for the House to support the community, as Tracie noted:

We took on the weekly information sessions to give the community a voice as well as a platform to get information about this crisis to the community in a way they could understand. It was a more personalised approach and we were able to tap into a number of resources and people to ensure we had the best information we could for our community (TL Diary excerpts 2014)

The emergency response team viewed MNH as a trusted community network that could be utilised during an emergency (MNH media 2014); it subsequently became a collection point for P2 face masks (recommended to reduce exposure to particulate matter in the smoke) and later for vacuum cleaners to assist residents in their clean-up and was invited onto the official response and recovery board.

MNH was commended for its role during the mine fire event by the first inquiry into the Hazelwood mine fire (2014:384): ‘The Board commends: those from Morwell Neighbourhood House ... for their efforts in keeping their community as informed and connected as they could under the circumstances’. Mark Potter, the then Regional Director of Gippsland Country Fire Authority (CFA) also confirmed the valuable role that MNH played during the event:

The MNH was one community group that we could rely on to disseminate information. To ensure the right information was being relayed to the community in the right format was absolutely critical. We saw the Neighbourhood House step up and facilitate and lead and ensure that communication occurred ... (Source: MNH media 2014)

During and after the Hazelwood mine fire MNH also developed a strong relationship and partnership with EMV. As Craig Lapsley (EMV Commissioner) said at the 2016 Annual General Meeting of MNH:

One thing I want to emphasise is we have a great relationship and a valued relationship ... [to be] able to connect with you during the Hazelwood mine fire and after that ... has been something that’s been a huge benefit to me and my team. We often reflect that if we didn’t do that we wouldn’t be where we are today. Take that as an absolute compliment of what you do and how you do it, because you are very special and you do it so well. (Source: Video message relayed to MNH AGM)

At the time of the mine fire many Morwell residents believed they were not receiving adequate information from government agencies and the information they were receiving did not seem to reflect their experience. For example, they were told it was safe to stay in Morwell but they were suffering breathlessness, sore eyes and throats and a general lethargy and ‘fuzziness’ (Wood et al 2015). This dissonance between what they were being told and their experience led to distrust of, and for some a sense of being abandoned by, the authorities and agencies whose role was to support the community (Wood et al 2015). As the interview poem below (and the poem at the

start of this section) illustrates, many residents turned to MNH as a trusted source of information and to advocate for them.

When there is a community disaster
often the Neighbourhood House
is one of the first ports of call for local community
It catches many Neighbourhood Houses
by surprise

I know that Morwell Neighbourhood House
jumped into that fray
and responded very positively
to their community's sense of loss and confusion
and tried to be a bit of a touchstone space
for people
who just didn't know where else to go

They did the advocacy work
They spoke out,
listening, speaking out
a place where the voices of the community
could be channelled

It was giving hope to the community
at a time when it felt hopeless,
everybody felt like they'd been abandoned
This place was listening
and this place was being very pragmatic
They saw this place getting frustrated
I'm feeling frustrated,
no one gives a rats about me,
but I see an entity as frustrated as I am,
Someone's listening
Somebody to go into bat
No matter what
They go into bat for me
(*NHVIC representative*)

The mine fire was an event that negatively affected many of the people who came to MNH. The team of staff and volunteers at MNH acknowledged people's confusion and uncertainty and acted to support and advocate for them and the wider Morwell and Latrobe Valley communities. As Tracie reflects in her diary, Neighbourhood Houses are both a trusted support in the community and able to respond to the needs of their community with a flexible grassroots approach:

I had underestimated the impact we were having on our community previous to this event. We are far more valued and appreciated than I realised. The community considers us a safe

friend who looks out for them. We are now committed to ensuring we do not let them down.

Neighbourhood Houses are unique at this level. I've been able to freely make decisions, approach and engage and advocate for my community the way I feel it would be most effective. We can take our own path and push the grassroots cause without fear of consequences. (TL diary excerpts 2014)

After the mine fire MNH continued to support the community as the process of recovery began. However, the mine fire event had consequences for the House that made its ongoing activities and program less financially viable and lead Tracie and the Committee of Governance to reconsider how they could best support the community.

Recovery after the mine fire: Impact of mine fire event on MNH programs

The mine fire affected most people in Morwell and for some the experience left them feeling angry about what they believed was an inadequate response to the event and anxious about possible future health implications (Wood et al 2015). As Tracie records in her diary and in an interview in 2014, the Hazelwood mine fire event seemed to leave some people disinclined to engage in their usual activities, perhaps withdrawing to reflect and make sense of the event; it certainly had an impact on attendance at MNH:

All computer classes have been cancelled due to lack of numbers and we are only running 2.5 days of classes. Most of our fee for service classes have been closed too. This event had had a dramatic effect on our class numbers and will continue to do so this year. (TL diary excerpt 2014)

Presenting a range of classes for the community is a staple activity for many Neighbourhood Houses which provides an income stream for those Neighbourhood Houses. As such, low attendance at classes at MNH had a financial impact on the House. As Tracie commented in 2014:

we've been impacted financially here because we've closed all our classes, people aren't engaged, that component of the community that were coming in to do courses have either left or have bunkered down because they've got their own social and emotional issues and they can't engage on that level. So financially we're up the wazoo as well (Interview with TL 2014).

In a diary entry for March 2014 Tracie reflects on the impact of the mine fire event and believes the House will have to change in terms of the activities it offers, if it is to continue responding to and supporting people in the Morwell community:

There is a lot to be learnt from this crisis. I believe the NH will have a lot to reflect on as we continue our journey through. The impact within the community, our responses, what we did well, what we didn't do so well, what we have learned, where to from here? I believe

the NH will journey through significant changes in how it delivers classes, and how to remain relevant to our community. Changes ahead not only for us but for the whole community. (TL Diary excerpt 2014)

As the two poems below illustrate, the mine fire event and its impact on the community and the House provided a moment and an opportunity for MNH to reflect on how it could best support their community and that perhaps running classes were less of a priority.

It has changed a lot since the mine fire.
Before the mine fire
we were quite successful,
ran lots of classes,
did lots of things
more in the educational line

But since the mine fire
people haven't been coming for the classes
People I think decided
that there were other things
that were more important
They got quite worried about the fire
and needed help
They came to us

Since they came in for the mine fires
they've learnt that we can help
Most of the people don't want classes now
They want something else
It's more support that they want and help
and that's what we've been doing more of since then

I think our new role
is helping the community
to go where they need to go
or where they want to go
to find out what's the best thing for them
Not for us to find out
but to help them
find out what's best
(Representative of Committee of Governance)

They seem to use the Hazelwood fires
as a reference point, a threshold
They haven't had an expectation
that after will be the same as before
And neither have they gone into the victim mode
"We can't do that anymore, because we had this terrible event."
They've said,

“That thing happened,
it’s impacted our community,
how do we now change what we do
to adjust to the changed circumstances
and respond to the changed circumstances?”

It’s a great opportunity to say,
“Well what the hell are we,
what are we doing in this neighbourhood
and what’s the best way to go forward?”
I think they’re asking those questions
and coming up with some really good responses
(*NHVIC representative*)

People were looking for something else from the House as they ‘processed’ and made sense of the mine fire event. In response MNH changed the types of activities offered at the House; there were fewer accredited courses and more social support activities, such as a Tuesday Community Lunch, a series of facilitated workshops to allow community residents to tell their story of the mine fire, and providing a base for The Free Store – a once-a-month store that is like an Opportunity Shop except that everything is free (an initiative of community members www.morwellnh.org.au/free-store-at-morwell-neighbourhood-house/). Two other ‘really good responses’ (see poem above) that the House instigated were the Valley to Valley project and inviting Dr John Hewson to speak to the community about the transition from coal, these will be examined in more detail below.

Recovery after the mine fire: The Valley to Valley project

The biggest one
that she came up with
and the one that I think
had the biggest effect
was the Valley to Valley project.

Tracie rang
said we’re going to do some photographs
Simple
just a photo with you holding some letters
saying mateship; valley to valley; love; friendship;
whatever the word was

We started ringing schools
ringing community groups
At the start
there was a lot of people
going well what are we doing this for
and you explain to them
the Hunter is being smashed

we had it bad
we had people help us
They're now in trouble
it's our turn to help somebody else

Next minute
people were ringing us
saying we want our photo taken
we want to be part of this
It just blossomed
It was fantastic
Very powerful

It just made sense
rather than us being on the receiving end
it was a great way
of the residents here
saying
we're going to help somebody else

Once they realised
that they were going to be helping somebody else
that it wasn't them being looked down upon
they could go and help somebody else
The resilience within the people
you could just see
people straightened up that little bit
they had that little bit more pride
they had that little bit more go in their stride
they were doing something.

A couple of the local schools
Said their kids
were feeling a bit overwhelmed by (the mine fire event)
it was a huge event
they were intimidated
Then all of a sudden
they were being told
hey there are some people that need your help
It just had a real positive effect
on the primary schools in the area

A principal actually came up
he said
this was the best thing
we have done for the kids
since the mine fire
He said
their whole attitude has changed
he said
they've gone from being
oh what if the mine fire happens again
it was terrible and people were sick

it was a bad thing
They couldn't put it into perspective

For them to know that something bad
had happened to some others
but they are able to help
and send a message
he said
it just built their resilience
built their strength up
and lifted them up

It changes the mentality
it takes it from the victim mentality
of poor me, poor me
to that hero mentality
of I'm going to help somebody else
I'm going to go in and make them feel better
You could see the change in the community
the community mindset went from being
poor us
mine fire, poor us
to
let's move on
it's time to get going
We're on our feet let's go
what's our next challenge?
It was just that whole change in mentality
I think that Valley to Valley project
was a catalyst for it
(Local councillor)

In April 2015 floods devastated the Hunter Valley in New South Wales. The Hunter Valley is another rural, coal mining-based community and as such there were natural synergies between it and Latrobe Valley. Tracie Lund saw this as an opportunity to reach out to another community that had been hit by a disaster and initiated a project that became known as the Valley to Valley project. There were two aspects to the project: a series of photo shoots with community groups where they used large letters to spell out a message of support and hope, for example, mateship, dream, family; and a message book where people were asked to write messages of support. At the end of the seven week project nearly 1000 people had taken part in 40 photo shoots, there were nearly 500 handwritten messages and 28 pieces of artwork. The photos and messages were compiled into a book and delivered to the communities of Maitland and Dungog in the Hunter Valley. The photos were also exhibited at the Latrobe Regional Art Gallery in Morwell.



Opening of the Valley to Valley exhibition at Latrobe Regional Art Gallery (Source: Morwell Neighbourhood House)

As the poem above illustrates this was an inspirational and inspired community development initiative that appears to have had a significant impact on both communities and contributed to the recovery process in Morwell (Latrobe Valley Express, 26/6/15, From One Valley to Another). In many ways this initiative turns ideas of recovery on its head by asking those affected to reach out and help others rather than being helped. As Hawe (2009:32) found in a review of the literature on disasters and recovery, support strategies that focus only on the disaster event ‘make it hard for people to “break role” and take time out from the “victim stereotype”’. The Valley to Valley project enabled people to ‘break out’ of the victim role and to even feel like ‘heroes’. The Valley to Valley project shifted, in at least a small way, the perception, by some, of Morwell and its community as victims and powerless.

The project also had another positive impact by fostering social connection between people both within Morwell and beyond its borders with the communities of the Hunter Valley. Social connection is important for the recovery of individuals and communities, increasing their sense of wellbeing. A recent study (Gibbs et al 2016:15) that examined the impacts of the Black Saturday bushfires found that participating in community groups facilitated people’s recovery and increased their mental health and wellbeing. Gibbs et al (2016:23) believe community groups are

‘critical influences on social connection and individual and community level recovery ... and facilitate wide participation.’ Social connection aids people’s recovery and these community groups connect people. This has been one of the roles that MNH has successfully undertaken, increasing participation in House activities and strengthening networks between community groups by inviting them to participate in the Valley to Valley project.

Recovery from the mine fire: The Hewson event and the transition from coal

It seems to me
that the House has played a role
even beyond what would be expected
of a Neighbourhood House
in saying,
This is not just about the fire,
this is about transition
away from coal fire power stations
and we need to be thinking about this

The Hewson event,
for a tiny little Neighbourhood House
to pull off something like that
And not to be overawed
(*NHVIC representative*)

On a Friday evening in July 2016 Dr John Hewson (former Federal Liberal Party leader) was the speaker at an event about the transition from coal powered energy generation and the implications and possibilities for the Latrobe Valley. The event was facilitated by MNH as part of its ‘commitment to support conversations and opportunities to discuss things that matter to the Latrobe Valley’ and as a way to ‘inform’ and ‘empower’ the community as it ‘navigates the future’ (Source: Invitation to the Event produced by MNH). The two interview poems, below, tell the story:

The power generation industry
there’s a big dark cloud over the top of it
We’ve got this massive resource
and everyone is going
they are going to flick the switch
and 5,000 jobs are going to go.

Neighbourhood House
have taken a very negative situation
and said how do we turn that into a positive?
The committee of the House and Tracie
They got Dr John Hewson down

to talk about diversification and transition
He came up with a different use for coal

The house bought together a range of people
from different ends of the spectrum
on a committee
We've got a group together
ranging from
local scientists,
builders,
university people,
accountants,
members of the Greens,
members of the Liberal party,
members of the Labor party
in the same room working together
working in a positive manner together
saying
we need to check this option out to see if it's viable
If it's not
then we go and look at something else

To bring those diverse groups together
and have them in a room working together
people giving up their time quite freely
saying this is what we need to do
has been absolutely fantastic.

It's putting the people from this area
in control.
It's not somebody in Canberra or Spring Street
it's locals doing it
it's people here having a voice at the table
not being dictated to
this is what will happen to you
this is what we will do to you
It's the locals standing up
and saying
this is what we're going to do
(*Local councillor*)

It's not necessarily
that we want to follow
what John Hewson says,
it's a conversation
that this community needs to have
about what's going on.
We're facilitating that, not running it.

The Greens don't like it.
Voices of the Valley weren't happy with it

But as we said to them,
this is just a conversation
to get things going,
to get people thinking
about what needs to be done
and how we can do this

General community are really with us with this
For them there's the thought of
if we do something like this
maybe there'll be work
Maybe there'll be the work here
like there used to be
(Committee of Governance representative)

As mentioned above, Dr Hewson talked not just theoretically about the transition from coal and potential opportunities for Latrobe Valley but put an actual project proposal on the table for the Latrobe Valley community to consider. This had not been the intention or expectation of MNH. The proposal was controversial in that it was a project that would use existing coal reserves in a new way; this angered many people at the event who were sceptical of the project and perhaps were more of the opinion that coal mining should cease. However, some people saw it as a potential opportunity that would provide a way for a staged transition from coal. MNH responded by facilitating the formation of a committee of community members to assess the proposal. MNH did not run this committee but used its networks and contacts to gather together people with a range of skills, for example technical expertise, business management, and financial skills, who would be able to assess the proposal and report back to the community. At the time of this report that assessment is still ongoing.

Morwell and the Latrobe Valley were largely created and developed out of the coal mines when in the 1920s the State Electricity Commission was formed and it was decided that the coal reserves of the Latrobe Valley would be used to generate Victoria's electricity. The implications of a transition away from coal-fired electricity generation loom large for the community in terms of economic and employment prospects but perhaps also in terms of community identity. There is a perception or narrative in the community that recovery is not just about recovery from the mine fire; it is also seen as recovery from social and economic disadvantage that many people believe stems from the privatisation of the power industry in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The experience of privatisation left many feeling 'it was done' to them and they want an opportunity to be part of the decision-making process that will shape their future. People want to know what the future holds for Morwell and the Latrobe Valley as climate change precipitates a need to

transition from coal based systems and they want a say in the future of their town and the Latrobe Valley.



Members of MNH Committee of Governance with Dr John Hewson and Shane Howard (Source: Morwell Neighbourhood House)

The MNH see its role as providing spaces and opportunities for conversations and information dissemination to enable the community, perhaps particularly those sectors of the community whose voices are less often heard in policy and government spaces, to decide what options it wants to support or oppose and the direction or vision it wants for the future. MNH believes its role is not to tell the community but to provide it with access to information, stakeholders and decision-makers. The Hewson event is a recovery strategy that is place-based, social network-based and empowerment-based – three types of approaches that it is recommended be integrated in any recovery framework (Hawes 2009:31). Part of a place-based approach is developing a vision for the future of the community, as Hawes (2009:36) outlines:

a strategy of community consultation and visioning, to enable residents to picture the sort of community they wished to create. This is a method to engage communities in dialogue and surface different opinions about “what should be” as well as “how to get there”.

The success of the Hewson event, even the fact that there could be such an event relied on the social networks of the House. MNH empowers community members or ‘locals’ (see poem

below) by providing opportunities for hearing and being heard and being involved in the decision-making process; and it contributes to developing a vision for the future of the community.

Conclusion

It's because they listen
To what locals want
Rather than saying
This is what we're going to do for you

It's a community that's been
kicked and kicked and kicked
people who had got to the stage
where they were just down
and they were just going
keep kicking me I don't care
Neighbourhood House has played a role
in changing that mentality

The mine fire they said was the perfect storm
This (MNH) was the perfect counter to the perfect storm
It was what was needed
when it was needed,
where it was needed
with the right people
It's just their positive attitude

I cannot get over
how they just feed that positive vibe
back out in the community
and how they change the community attitude
I've never seen it anywhere else
and I've never seen it happen in the worst moment
that there's just that spark
and that switch is flicked
and the whole mentality of a region has changed
and that's what they did
and they continue to do it
They just have that sixth sense
that we need to do this
and they do it and it works

People have gone
well you know what
we can have a say
about what we're going to do
we can make a difference
we can decide
we want to look at this
or we want to do that

or we want to move in that direction

Resilience wise for the community
I'd hate to think about
the state Morwell would have been in
if they hadn't have been there
because it's almost got the town
off its knees
standing up
and looking forward
(*Local councillor*)

The Valley to Valley project and the Hewson event were innovative and inspirational recovery initiatives that responded to both current needs and future aspirations. However, the more important lesson to be learnt from the recovery activities of MNH is the importance of its process and framework, underpinned by a community development approach. There are many factors important for fostering recovery, for example leadership (Paton et al 2014), a pre-existing sense of community (Norris et al 2008), the efficacy of the initial disaster response (Tierney & Oliver-Smith 2012), the adequate coordination of recovery activities (Sharpe et al 2009), macro social, political and economic policies (Norris et al 2008), and financial support (Jordan & Javernick-Will 2014); however they do not fully explain or determine whether recovery will be successful. Recovery is a process as much as it is an outcome and it is the process that will often determine the success of any initiatives and potential outcomes. A community development approach, such as that adopted by MNH, is likely to be more successful for long-term social recovery and to deliver recovery that 'builds back better' (Mulligan & Nadarajah 2011). It does this through promoting participation, empowerment, social connectivity and ensuring actions and strategies are community led.

The critical and underpinning element of a successful recovery process is empowerment; it is this that enables participation in planning and decision-making to produce a community-led and defined recovery strategy (Norris et al 2008; Thornley et al 2015). The Australian Institute of Emergency Management (2011:36) states that:

Recovery agencies should facilitate and support individuals, groups and communities to identify, prioritise and implement their own recovery process. This involves working with and engaging communities on issues of local concern, and developing localised community recovery plans and projects.

Community participation in decision-making, whether formal or informal, a sense of control, self-determination and collective efficacy have been cited by many researchers as important factors in any recovery process (Mutch 2014; Norris et al 2008; Bach et al 2015; Jordan &

Javernick-Will 2014; Thornley et al 2015; Australian Emergency Management Institute 2011; Mulligan & Nadarajah 2012). Empowerment is the key and ‘provides the model and structure for all other action’ (Hawe 2009:41). Such empowerment, to succeed, needs to be accompanied by capacity-building and a strengths-based approach (focusing on the assets in a community and the skills of people rather than what is lacking). The road to empowerment can take many forms and fostering increased social connection, through activities such as the Valley to Valley project or the Tuesday Community Lunches at MNH, while having intrinsic benefits can also lead to the development of networks and ‘a network of strongly connected people can change the landscape of a neighbourhood and a city’ (Mandell 2010:280).

A process based on empowerment and participation can contribute as much, if not more, to recovery than any other factor or outcome, and can even produce unexpected pathways and outcomes (Gibbs et al 2015). The impact of the process on recovery can in many ways be greater than the sum of the outcomes of various initiatives. If recovery is a process and the impact of the process is greater than the sum of its parts, then perhaps the same can be said for MNH. Understanding its impact on recovery from the mine fire and its impact in the community more generally, cannot be discerned by only looking at individual projects but must be seen in the context of its process and framework: a community-led, empowering and capacity-building framework, a commitment to listen to what people need and to work in partnership with them to achieve outcomes.

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