

## Repair-focused social enterprises for environmental and social resilience

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### Introduction

Social enterprises have solidified their position as being effective in addressing pressing environmental problems in the past few decades. Repair has emerged as a driving force behind many of them, especially in urban contexts where repair services have been dwindling due to the vast availability of cheap products. In addition to their value as resource maintenance services, they confront societal gaps such as rising unemployment amongst young people in disadvantaged areas (Barraket, Qian & Riseley, 2019). Various examples showcase how, by providing training in repair and reuse, they overcome the barriers of the labour market (Gutberlet, 2016), especially for young people that had some interaction with the legal system (Soppitt, Oswald & Walker, 2021) and at-risk due to early school leaving. In that way, they become the means to pursue environmental and social resilience, in condition of growing precarity.

### CISERR – A Creative Repair Social Enterprise

Following this, the paper discusses an example of a newly-established social enterprise with an emphasis on creative repair, situated in Maryborough, a town in regional Queensland. The social enterprise is part of an ongoing initiative titled The Creative Industries, Social Enterprise, Repair and Restoration (CISERR), which has been operating since 2022 by

Testimony Arts, a for purpose company, offering creative repair, literacy and numeracy, and life skills workshops to at-risk youth. The initiative has so far been directed toward young men that had some interaction or in danger of a future encounter with the youth justice system. Moreover, it is available as an alternative educational option to young men (15 – 19 years) that have been disengaged from conventional schooling. The impending need of employability pathways for CISERR's youth participants was predominant in the Monitoring, Learning and Evaluation (MEL) findings<sup>1</sup> from the pilot study (2021) and two iterations (2022-2023)<sup>2</sup> of the initiative. For that reason, the third round of the initiative was anchored in creating the circumstances to start a social enterprise in order to support at-risk youth getting prepared for employment or becoming self-employed.

The activities of the third round were grounded in putting together an infrastructure for the social enterprise and training young men to deal with the complexities of running it. This entailed the building of a trailer (figure 1) by the youth participants in collaboration with volunteers from the local Men's shed, to transfer and exhibit the artefacts created during the creative repair and art workshops. Furthermore, the third round consisted of dividing the youth participants into three creative specialisations (visual arts, arts communication and creation, repair and restoration), designed to prepare them for the

<sup>1</sup> This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Research Ethics and Integrity Office for Research, Griffith University (variation approved 27/02/2023—GU Ref No: 2021/734). Informed consent (to participate and/or to publish) was obtained from individual participants and parents/guardians.

<sup>2</sup> CISERR was based on a pilot study under the name Transformative Repair for Social Change (TRSC). A more detailed description of the MEL and findings from the pilot and two rounds are provided in other publications (Kalantidou and Brennan, 2024a; Kalantidou and Brennan, 2024b).

production and curation/communication of the creative repair and art artefacts to be sold via the trailer.



Figure 1. CISERR's trailer. ©TammyBrennan.

Its use was trailed at the local markets in the fourth round of CISERR, which run between August and October of 2024, together with the readiness of the youth participants to operate a social enterprise by sourcing materials, producing creative repair and art artefacts, budgeting, setting up, selling merchandise and interacting with customers.

### Methodologies and methods

To evaluate the effectiveness of the framework that was employed for this round as part of the MEL process, a mixed-methods methodology was adopted to collect data. This entailed quantitative data such as the number of artefacts, the consecutive weeks the trailer was taken to the markets and the respective sales as well as the youth participants' attendance rate. Regarding qualitative data, interviews were conducted with 11 youth participants, three youth workers and CISERR's director.

During this round, the CISERR trailer participated in the markets on eight consecutive Thursdays and over 70 artefacts were sold. The youth participants' attendance was almost 100 per cent. Their experience of using the trailer and repurposing artefacts through creative repair was captured via interviews, which focused on questions related to: the evaluation of the activities of the program; creative repair skilling opening employability pathways; and their willingness to go back to school. The youth workers' and director's interviews emphasised the effectiveness of the initiative, their role in it and their perception of the youth participants operating the trailer/social enterprise. Photographic material was also collected from the practice of creative repair, artefacts and market activity. For the analysis of the interviews and visual material, content analysis

and visual content analysis were used, respectively.

### Findings

The themes that emerged from the content analysis of the youth participants were: increased self-confidence by having a social interface and receiving positive feedback from the local community; self-capacity to repurpose artefacts and provide services at the market; a clearer vision of a future professional direction; and the possibility of self-employment through the social enterprise. The themes that arose from the youth workers' answers were related to: how the markets empowered the skills that CISERR offers (creative repair, art, literacy and numeracy, life skills); and the sharper focus of future employability that the trailer and the social enterprise provided. The youth workers also highlighted the behavioural shift of the young men while at the markets, their increased social skills and the gratification they experienced by being able to operate the trailer. They additionally stressed the necessity for a permanent space from which the social enterprise can function, where the youth participants would also have a 'home'. Finally, a separate interview with the director of CISERR outlined the steps that led to the realisation of the social enterprise, the possibility of it being a viable employability pathway for young people in Maryborough and the need to more actively involve the community and local schools in this effort. The visual and quantitative data reinforced the themes that surfaced from the interviews by evidencing the volume and quality of the creative repair work grounded in mentor-youth collaboration, youth participation and engagement.

### Conclusions

Without disregarding the challenges that an endeavour like running a repair-led social enterprise with at-risk young men encompasses such as constant involvement of youth workers, ongoing funding to keep the workshops running, a permanent base for creation and storage, and greater community involvement, the CISERR social enterprise has set up the conditions for self, communal and material repair. The findings from the MEL process demonstrated that by establishing a physical and digital infrastructure, it gave agency to the youth participants to learn in

action, keep alive skills handed down through transgenerational exchange, demonstrate the creative side of working with repair and reuse, and re-engage with their local community. From an environmental and social perspective, the CISERR social enterprise salvages resources and introduces to the local public ways of repairing and reusing their things while it simultaneously repairs the relationship/perceptions between at-risk youth and their community. Envisioned as next steps are a permanent space also operating as a repair café and activating a community-based repair/reuse/share/exchange scheme.

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