



The Benevolent Society Social Issues Paper 4

Leadership, democracy and the role of non profit organisations in promoting positive social change

Non profit organisations are essential in a healthy democracy. They provide a platform for diverse views to be heard and for individuals and communities to participate in public life. While Australia is a prosperous, thriving democracy, there are significant numbers of citizens who are economically, socially and politically excluded. Many non profit organisations are committed to strengthening our democracy through promoting participation and working to reduce structural disadvantage. The Benevolent Society is optimistic that non profits working with each other and with governments, communities and the private sector can achieve positive social change.

Why this is important

Australia's non profit sector is enormously diverse, traversing fields such as education, culture and recreation, the environment, health, research and social services. A wide range of non profit organisations, peak bodies, coalitions and committees advocate for justice and fairness in Australia.

The non profit sector makes a substantial contribution to Australia's economic wellbeing by providing services, jobs and infrastructure. The non profit workforce represents roughly 6.8% of the Australian workforce. Australian non profit organisations received more than \$10 billion from governments in 1999-2000 to deliver a vast array of services to the community. In the same period non profits accounted for 3.3% of Australia's GDP, 4.7% if the volunteer workforce is taken into account¹.

Increasing public participation

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) advocates for increased levels of public participation in the work of government. This gives government the opportunity to draw on diverse sources of information and different perspectives as part of the policy-making process. When greater numbers of people participate in civic life governments and democratic processes are more representative, accountable and transparent. Increased public participation also strengthens trust in public institutions.

Thirty-four per cent of adult Australians² volunteer for one of Australia's 700,000 non profit organisations³. Australian non profit organisations increase public participation in the work of government by supporting marginalised individuals and communities to become active participants in all aspects of life including employment, education, local politics and volunteering. Non profits are especially well placed for this role as they provide a local, accessible service which can respond and adapt to the needs and strengths of local communities.

Increasing social cohesion

Democratic governments need a basic level of trust among their citizens - or social cohesion - if they are to function well. Social cohesion generates community participation and supportive relationships and networks. High levels of social cohesion help improve the performance of democratic institutions and increases their capacity to work for the greatest good.

Non profit organisations help to increase levels of social cohesion through their work with individuals and communities. The Benevolent Society works with people across the lifespan to build caring, inclusive communities and a just society.

Shaping social policy

Non profit organisations are uniquely placed to help shape social policy in Australia. Good policy reflects a range of perspectives and is based on real people's lives and experiences. By drawing on their 'on-the-ground' experience, non profits are able to promote the interests of individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage. Non profits can identify new, emerging areas of need, articulate ideas and solutions and lobby for policy change. Increasingly, non profits are supporting calls for change using evidence from rigorous evaluations and research. In partnership with all sectors and especially universities, non profits contribute to the national and international evidence base by developing and documenting good practice.

In recent years, many non profits have faced significant challenges to their capacity to advocate for their clients and deliver quality, responsive services. The Benevolent Society welcomes the federal government's social inclusion agenda and the restoration of the right for the non profit sector to advocate and participate actively in public debate. Recently non profit organisations were consulted on the development of a National Compact outlining how the sector and government can work together effectively. The Benevolent Society supports a Compact which is adequately resourced with clear measurable targets and transparent review mechanisms⁴.

The recent global financial crisis presents a new challenge for non profit organisations in Australia. It is the role of organisations like ours to advocate for an equitable government response which addresses the structural root causes of poverty. It is also our role to work with individuals and communities

to develop innovative approaches to breaking the cycle of poverty. The Federal Government's proposed Community Response Taskforce to advise on responses to the economic hardships caused by the economic downturn is a positive example of how government and the non profit sector can work together to develop equitable social and economic policy.

What should be done

Non profit organisations must continue raising social policy issues and initiating productive debate across sectors, backed-up by research evidence and on-the-ground service-delivery experience.

The non-profit sector gains its legitimacy through facilitating participation and social action in the communities and areas where we work, and by demonstrating leadership through ethical and accountable behaviour in internal operations - not just in what we do but in how we do things.

We call on all sectors to work productively together to influence social policy and improve outcomes for disadvantaged communities. Collaboration between communities and the non profit, government and private sectors will help achieve positive social change.

Endnotes

1. Non-Profit Institutions Satellite Accounts, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002, ABS cat. No. 5256.0, ABS, Canberra
2. Volunteering Australia
<http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org>
3. Maddison, S., Dennis, R., and Hamilton, C. *Silencing Dissent: Non-government organisations and Australian democracy*. Discussion Paper 65, The Australia Institute. June 2004
4. The Benevolent Society. Submission on a National Compact, 2008 <http://www.bensoc.org.au/uploads/documents/submission-national-compact-sep20081.pdf>

Social Issues Papers

The Benevolent Society works with vulnerable individuals, families and communities who face a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. Our Social Issues Agenda identifies 12 broad issues that are related to social and economic inclusion, and our series of issues papers explores these challenges and some potential solutions. To read the full series of social issues papers go to www.bensoc.org.au

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