

The Emerging VOICE and Survival of Small Not-for-Profit Organisations

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Abstract

Small Not-for-Profit, Non-Government Organisations (SNGOs) are emerging as a consolidated group to advocate for their own survival. This is an urgent task. SNGOs are generally close to the communities they service, they are flexible and they provide an independent voice for their clients. Yet many SNGOs walk a fine line between survival and extinction. The general community and the public, private and even the community sectors still hardly recognise SNGOs as a separate category or structure that needs attention. These organisations have never had a strong voice, separate lobby group or body to support their maintenance and development. One of the primary reasons for sustaining SNGOs is to maintain the distribution of power related to resources and the representation of diverse groups and communities that make up our nation. Just as the gap between rich and poor is growing, so is the gap between small and large not-for-profit , organisations. The need for a representative body for SNGOs is now more important than it has ever been.

In this paper I will discuss the value of SNGOs and the importance of the voice of SNGOs both individually and collectively. I will then look at the impact of the economic and competitive climate on SNGOs and their survival. Finally I will discuss the development, activities and direction of VOICE for SONG –(Small Organisations Non-Government) - a coalition whose mission is to ensure the survival of SNGOs and the development of a representative national body. It has been a major challenge to ensure that the voice of this group is heard, even within the Third Sector. I will outline the struggles we in VOICE for SONG have had in making our voices heard and in developing interest, support and participation in the cause.

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Introduction

I have worked for the same small non-government, not-for-profit organisation (hereafter SNGOs) for 9 years. SNGOs like large non-government organisations (hereafter LNGOs) are part of the third sector and “are neither creatures of the state, nor of the market. As the third sector we only exist insofar as we remain independent of those other sectors” (Onyx 1996:1). A key role for the community sector is to provide a VOICE – be an advocate for the disadvantaged – to defend social justice and influence social change. In addition, just as strategic leaders in business use their voices and influence to change industry rules (Taylor 1995:74), it is the role of SNGOs to pressure governments to introduce changes that will enhance the environment in which they work. The third sector voice involves participation in debate with government, corporations, others within the third sector and the general community around issues for the groups they represent, broader societal and industry issues. In the current economic climate the human services area is increasingly being governed by the philosophy of the market. This includes a competitive tendering and contracting culture. The advocacy role of third sector organisations is being diminished. In this climate SNGOs are very vulnerable and many have closed down. There has been little public awareness of these closures.

Representatives from SNGOs have always participated in influencing change in our society. Yet the role of the voice of SNGOs has often not been recognised, where voice refers to participation in activities that involve social change. In addition, as a collective group SNGOs have not had a representative body, similar to that which exists for small business in the private sector. Such a body would raise awareness of our value, lobby for our developmental needs and be a voice to protect us in hostile climates, such as that which currently exists. This lack of voice at the collective level now needs to be rectified. Just as the gap between the rich and the poor is growing, so is the gap between small and large not-for-profit, non-government organisations, such that SNGOs are dying.

The voice of and for SNGOs is slowly emerging to challenge these trends. This paper will demonstrate the value and importance of the voice of SNGOs both individually and collectively. I will then discuss the economic and competitive climate and its impact on SNGOs,. Finally I will share my own experience of working in a SNGO and deal with the development, activities and direction of “VOICE for SONG” – (Small Organisations – Non-Government) - a coalition of SNGOs whose mission is to ensure the survival of small non-government organisations and the development of a representative national body. It has been a major challenge to make the voice of this group heard even within the Third Sector. This paper will therefore also include our experience of initially struggling to have our voices heard and the growing interest, support and participation in recent times.

Definition and history of SNGOs

There are a number of different definitions of small. However, according to the 1994 Industry Commission Inquiry into Community Social Welfare Organisations small agencies are defined as those organisations with government funding of \$100,000 or more but an income of less than \$1 million, whilst very small agencies are those with government funding of less than \$100,000 (cited in Leveratt 1999).

The Industry Commission estimated that very small NGOs comprised around 30% of the sector but received less than two per cent of all government funding. By contrast, the 50 largest organisations comprised fewer than 0.05 per cent of the total number of organisations in the sector but received 28 per cent of the available government funding. SNGOs are far more reliant upon that funding than larger agencies.

SNGOs, in the form of societies of common interest and mutual assistance, have been around for centuries. With the recognition of the limitations of bureaucracy, the number and diversity of organisations in NSW grew in the late 1960s '70s and '80s. Movements emerged for self-help, resident action and welfare rights. Thousands of new non-profit organisations were formed to provide health, housing, community development, aged care and a range of other services. (Lyons 1992:310).

The Value and Voice of SNGOs

Individual Value

Most SNGOs develop out of an identified community need : a gap in service. Many clients of SNGOs have nowhere else to go. SNGOs provide important, unique services the local communities.

With minimal bureaucracy, SNGOs can provide a flexible, innovative and responsive direct service at the local level. As new issues are identified for their clients, SNGOs are able to change their approaches to address them without having to go through the hoops of bureaucracy.

SNGOs need not be locally based. Some provide statewide and national services. For instance, Charmian Clift Cottage provides a service for women with mental health issues from around the state. Other SNGOs that are widely viewed as local services are also unique in the State and even the nation. They provide services that are provided nowhere else or access target groups common to other areas but with no similar service. They often therefore are identifying and addressing needs that have State and national significance, pointing to gaps in policy for these client groups. They often provide a voice, representing these target groups and have influence at local, regional, State and national levels. Bradfield and Nyland identify the important role of SNGOs in providing a voice to all types of communities, and in enabling people to speak collectively to government about their needs. (Bradfield and Nyland, 1997:4).

They have flatter structures and limited hierarchy. This can support team work. Barraket states that the spirit of co-operation and good working relationships as being important as the mission for many of those working in SNGOs (Barraket, 2001). The structure itself attracts individuals to participate in the organisation.

Because of their nature, it is necessary for SNGOs to cast their nets more widely than their large counterparts. Many are compelled to draw a broader range of community

members into their management processes. This can be an empowering process and support opportunities and skills development for the community members.

Barraket also discusses how SNGOs can contribute to the big picture by a being model. She identifies how workers in co-operatives have a sense that they are contributing to the wider society by providing a model for direct service and social change (ibid).

They are the organisational structure from which many committed and innovative community members eventually operate. Tony Trimmingham has been a strong voice from the community in relation to drug matters. He became vocal after his son died of a heroin overdose. He was concerned about the lack of inclusion of family members in drug policy and interventions. He brought together many family members who had similar concerns. He has since founded an organisation called Family Drug Support, which is now a national service providing telephone support for family members. This organisation can be classified as an SNGO. The current government strategy is about developing social capital and strengthening families and communities. Part of this strategy involves supporting community members to come together to address issues and also to develop new organisations. These organisations will certainly start out as SNGOs.

The small structural type does not guarantee, but can support, innovation and creativity. For many of SNGO workers there is the freedom to be creative and innovative in very different ways to what would be possible if they co-ordinated small services that are part of LNGOs. In the private sector, small business is recognised for its innovation. Structures and incentives have been put in place by governments to encourage the development of small business, but not the development of SNGOs.

SNGOs can be structures that support personal and professional development and “career” progression. Our society generally sees career progression as involving moving up the hierarchy and each movement being matched with increased pay. The Oxford English Dictionary defines career as “course or progress through life or history” and “way of making livelihood and advancing oneself”. For many of workers in SNGOs the “progress” is one they define for themselves, not one that is defined for them. SNGOs are structures that can support individuals to gain satisfaction, contribute to society, define the value and paths of their work and be innovative in this process.

The preceding discussion shows the value of SNGOs that remain small. This should not be taken as a criticism of growth per se. Some SNGOs grow and become medium sized or LNGOs. Mission Australia began around 140 years ago with the establishment of Sydney City Mission to service the needs of people in the streets of inner Sydney. Similar Missions in other parts of the country were later established. Over time their services expanded and links were formed between the different Missions. Eventually all of them were brought together under the one legal identity of Mission Australia.

Some local SNGOs, while not having become LNGOs, have identified similar needs around the state or nation have been the beginnings of state and national networks. The Older Women’s Network is an example of this. The first group was formed in 1988 and since then many other groups have formed across the state and nation. The Older Womens Network is the only voice for older women. It acts as advocate as well as providing social activities for older women and consultancy to governments. The

combined funding base of all the groups still falls within the Industry Commissions classification of an SNGO.

The Freedoms and Efficiencies of SNGOs

Both LNGOs and SNGOs have an important place in our society. Neither is better. Both can be innovative. Equally both can be inefficient and ineffectual. Certainly LNGOs can be innovative using their resources and range of skills. SNGOs are able to be innovative and responsive to community needs, owing to minimal bureaucracy, and involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in management and planning.

There is some public acknowledgment and understanding of the value of grassroots structures that operate close to the community. There is also a general recognition that as grassroots structures become bigger they are prone to becoming less responsive (Salamon 1994:119). LNGOs can develop small units to gain some of the benefits of SNGOs. However, if a unit is small within a LNGO it is still required to comply with the policies of the LNGO. Its voice is not independent of its large framework. The manager of the small unit cannot use his or her voice to openly challenge government policy or even corporate activity unless there is approval from senior management. A small unit within a LNGO providing alcohol and other drug treatment services that has a disease model philosophy cannot declare itself as having a harm minimisation approach, even if the manager of the small unit views it as in the best community interest for the unit to change its practise.

Governments measure efficiency and effectiveness by the numbers of clients seen and stated cost per client. Yet unrealistic performance indicators can result in agency staff fudging statistics or clients simply service hopping to achieve their needs. While a LNGO may be more economically efficient through economies of scale, an SNGO may be more efficient with regards to its decision making processes and ability to be flexible to clients' needs. [In addition current efficiency measures do not take into account the co-operative relationships that can be formed between organisations that result in new activities that improve client outcomes and strengthen agency and community relationships.](#) The measures equally do not take into account the voice and activities of the small organisation influencing government policy which can again result in improved outcomes for the clients at a broad level.

Certainly LNGOs can gain *some* of the advantages of SNGOs by restructuring to develop small units within the large structure. Equally SNGOs can gain some of the benefits of LNGOs using their networks (Dunford and Palmer 1997), (Lawler 1997). The sector needs a mix of large and small organisations.

Collective Value

[The unique direct service provision and the representative voice mean that SNGOs contribute to the diversity of services across the third sector. The voices of SNGOs are voices for the diverse groups and communities in our society. Having voice is about having power. These diverse communities need strong representative voices – to harness resources, influence policy and community attitudes.](#)

The existence of SNGOs counterbalances the power of LNGOs. The fewer organisations that exist, the fewer independent voices and decision-makers there are

and the more uneven the distribution of power over societal structures, resources and decision making. It is an imperative that SNGOs continue to exist to support and be a voice for our diverse communities and to ensure flatter power structures and hierarchies. Collectively SNGOs can intervene in debates about the third sector. The result of these interventions affects their ability to support the communities they serve.

The collective voice of SNGOs have a role to challenge wider societal issues not necessarily specific to their organisations. Many challenge the increasing gap between rich and poor in our society – recognising that if this gap is not addressed there will be more disadvantaged clients and fewer services to carry out the work.

Context and Issues for Survival of SNGOs

The current climate values the generation of profit over other motives. There is an increasing disparity between the resources and power available to large and small organisations across all sectors, including between LNGOs and SNGOs. There are multinational companies with turnovers larger than the gross domestic products of many nation states (Sheehan, 2001:32). Local councils are merging, small community organisations are closing, amalgamating or being taken over. These changes are taking place in the name of effectiveness and efficiency and better use of the dollar. Social Policy Goals have become subordinate to Economic Policy Goals (Leveratt 1999:11)

Within the competitive climate the vulnerability of SNGOs has been influenced by a range of factors. In real terms funding is decreasing as annual funding increments have not kept up with rising costs. The size of SNGOs means that such reductions affect the viability of the organisation. Governments expect organisations to seek funds from other sources. However, SNGOs do not have the profile or resources to compete with LNGOs for funding. Even when new government funding is available, LNGOs are often receiving large sums, while SNGOs are struggling to gain small amounts to maintain our services' viability. In addition, the increasing legislative, statistical and reporting requirements in the name of accountability are unrealistic for SNGOs. (Levaratt 1999: 13). SNGOs also do not have the resources to co-ordinate themselves to develop collective strategies.

These requirements create immense stress for staff in SNGOs. In addition, decreasing service hours in a very small organisation – mean that the individual worker's hours need to be cut. This leaves little incentive to stay especially with pay and conditions being so poor. In some cases the loss of one skilled staff member can ultimately mean the closure of the organisation – sadly, quietly, with little fuss – no demonstrations or public campaigns. Many skilled workers leave SNGOs for large NGOs, government or even the private sector. Structurally, many skilled, experienced and innovative individuals are being discouraged from staying in SNGOs. Staff in SNGOs and in the third sector in general carry out valuable work. There is an increasing gap between the pay and conditions of staff across the different community, public and private sectors. This imbalance needs to be redressed.

Responses to the trends

There has been little action or even debate to challenge this trend towards the closures of many SNGOs. There has been a culture of silence around organisational vulnerability. SNGOs and their supporters are often too fearful to discuss vulnerability openly in case their funding is removed. In my experience, even peak bodies have been slow to

encourage discussion around these issues. In addition, the community sector emphasises service issues above infrastructure and organisational issues. Some peaks have suggested SNGOs come together to develop collective solutions. However, there are no additional resources and SNGOs do not have spare staff to focus on such strategies.

There is generally little distinction between the needs of SNGOs in comparison to large. Lessons can be learnt from the business sector. Unlike small business there is no representative voice for SNGOs. Small businesses are represented by Chambers of Commerce at local, regional, state and national levels. Their power is reflected in the fact that there is a State Minister for Small Business. During the period where the GST was being introduced, concerns for small business were regularly brought to the community's attention by the media. There is general recognition for their value in our society. Similar recognition does not exist for SNGOs. Certainly peaks incorporate SNGO's needs into the work they do. However, peaks represent large and small together. Within this structure it is easy for the needs of SNGOs to become marginalised.

Certainly there have been criticisms of SNGOs. These include concerns that once SNGOs are funded, community participation lessens. Also, many SNGOs experience difficulties attracting members to their management boards (Lyons1994:25). These factors and those described above have limited many SNGOs' ability to be truly innovative. The lack of attention to this organisational type and its developmental needs have been a key issue. Clearly, attention is required to support SNGOs to achieve their potential, improved performance and innovation.

The social entrepreneur movement has suggested that innovation is lacking in dealing with social issues and "the current welfare state system is ill-equipped to deal with many of the modern social problems it has to confront" (Leadbeater 1997:7). This movement challenges government's excessive bureaucracy, control and accountability requirements. It sees the answer as lying in social entrepreneurs who may operate in public, private and community sectors. These social entrepreneurs are able to work with few resources but with great creativity to build social capital to support people to help themselves. Social capital can be defined as "the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit" (Cox 1995:Lecture 2:1). The movement emphasises the skills, passions and energy of the person, or social entrepreneur, as being key to an innovative service, above the structure. (Brickell 2000). The movement considers that the majority of structures from which the social entrepreneurs operate will be small to medium sized organisations. The role of existing SNGOs in this movement is not yet clear. Certainly many existing SNGOs have so far not participated in this movement. The movement will not necessarily prevent the closure of existing SNGOs. There is no guarantee that the issues and groups these organisations represent will be addressed by new groups. There is therefore no guarantee that the diversity of services will continue. In addition new SNGOs will face very specific issues related to their size. The model described by Leadbeater indicates that these will need to grow. However, SNGOs can reap the benefits of social enterprise without becoming medium sized or LNGOS. As described above, they can be innovative and influential, especially if they work with other organisations, in pursuit of their goals of social justice. The focus on common goals and support for creativity and innovation within the sector should be as important as individual organisational goals. However, organisations are key structures through which

action happens and therefore need attention. This paper does not seek to critique the social entrepreneurial movement. However, irrespective of changes and new approaches, a representative body for SNGOs has a place in the third sector.

CASE STUDY

Working in Blacktown

I came to identify the issues described earlier through my experience of working at my own organisation, Blacktown Alcohol and other Drugs Family Services (BADFS). BADFS' core funding provides for the equivalent of two full time workers. BADFS works with families with issues related to drug use. Over the years we have received many calls from clients, who have already been in touch with a number of services, and are relieved to have at last found a service that will address their needs. They often tell us that people who they have spoken to before us have not understood their situation. Family interventions now have a significant place in drug policy. However this is only a recent development. The previous NSW Drug Strategy (1993-1998) did not even mention "family". Before family members found their voice in the media, I often found myself *alone* in advocating for families in relation to alcohol and other drug issues at State, regional and local conferences and meetings. It made no sense to me that I was raising these issues when I came from such a *small* organisation. I then realised the important role of voice in SNGOs. I had thought that inclusion of families in policy was a key issue. In response to inadequate policy for families affected by drug use, BADFS has held forums to encourage discussion and change.

Over time, with funding increments not meeting increased costs, staff at BADFS have for the last few years been threatened with reduced hours. Fortunately temporary funding has been gained just in time so this has not occurred. Initially it was hard to speak publicly about this vulnerability. However, it reached a point where it seemed there was nothing to lose, especially when I experienced so many skilled colleagues leaving small organisations. At that point I realised that viability issues were common to many of us.

Last year BADFS received funding to auspice an innovative interagency and community project called Bridges. BADFS is co-ordinating Bridges in collaboration with Western Sydney Area Health Services. Bridges aims to strengthen the community's ability to address drug issues in Blacktown LGA. It involves building social capital by bringing young people, adults and agencies from community, public and private sectors together to address the issues. There are a growing number of community and agency representatives involved in implementing this project. In June 2002 when this project is over BADFS will be faced with the same viability issues it faced before the project began.

There have been many challenges that have arisen for BADFS and my role in supporting BADFS' clients, staff, the organisation itself and the common community goals. BADFS' limited bureaucracy has supported me to take on each challenge and provided me with a sense that I am continuing to make a difference. Certainly many people have been curious as to why I have remained with this small organisation for so many years, especially after I gained my Masters in Community Management. Over the many years I feel I have developed trusting, co-operative relationships that support me to be myself, and encourage me to be creative and innovative. My work influences local

and big picture issues. At this point in time, there is nowhere else I want to be or where I could imagine having a greater influence.

The Development of “VOICE for SONG”

In early 1999 I began using BADFS voice to raise awareness of the vulnerability of *all* SNGOs and the need for strategic action. I had thought that simply by picking up the phone and speaking about this issue to a peak, a funding body or even another small organisation would result in fast committed action. Some individuals were certainly sympathetic. To my surprise, many were irritated or simply not interested. I experienced a sense of isolation. The sector's emphasis on service issues above organisational issues and a culture of silence in relation to organisational vulnerability has contributed greatly to the challenge.

While some peak bodies were involved in activities to support groups of SNGOs, they were not centrally focused on the survival of SNGOs across the sector. The cause has been hard to progress when nobody has been given the role of supporting or advocating for survival and development of SNGOs at the sector level. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that many individuals and organisations have been working on different aspects of the issue. Activities have been happening in pockets around the country to support survival including those carried out by NSW Council of Social Services (NCOSS) and Illawarra Forum (NCOSS and Illawarra Forum 2000) and Community Agencies Together, auspiced by Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) (Leveratt 1999) . However such activities have not been linked.

The experience of vulnerability and limited support for my organisation made me acutely aware of the lack of trust and co-operation between organisations within the Community Sector. This led my organisation to hold a forum/AGM in December 1999 with the theme “Leadership, Social Capital and Action in the Community Sector”. Social Capital can be applied to inter-organisational relationships. If trusting relationships could not be developed between organisations within the sector, what chance did we have to develop such relationships in the community in general ? For much of the previous year myself and others had lobbied Gary Moore, Director of NCOSS on the issue of survival of SNGOs. This lobbying was bearing some fruit, when, as one of the speakers, he continually brought up this issue in the discussion. He continually emphasised the need for SNGOs to get together to look at ways forward. The need to address the survival of SNGOs was raised at this Forum. After this meeting, Jackie Wilgress (Family Worker Training and Development Programme), Brad Wessling and Tony Hayes (supportive individuals from a LNGO and a government department) and myself called a further meeting where other representatives from SNGOs were invited to discuss issues related to our survival. We were also successful in gaining support from Deborah Sharpe, Executive Officer from Western Sydney Community Forum(WSCF), our regional peak. Soon after this Fiona Christian represented WSCF in her attendance of the meetings and resourcing of the group.

Our early discussions focused on how SNGOs did not have a voice. Others were making decisions about the future of our organisations without consulting us or worse still we were invisible. Marion Brierley from WESDARC suggested we call ourselves “VOICE for SONG”. We all agreed. Initial members were representatives from organisations with funding between approximately \$50,000 and \$500,000 per annum, most at the lower end of the funding base. Representation in this group covered SNGOs from a range of

fields : Youth, Family Support, Mental Health, Women, Alcohol and Other Drugs, Child Protection, Regional Resources, Neighbourhood Centre and Community Development. Representation from such a range of fields really indicated to us that survival of SNGOs was a sector-wide concern and that there could be power in numbers.

WSCF gave those of us in “VOICE for SONG” the strong message that we needed to keep meeting to provide WSCF with our direction and energy. This clarified for me what I had been learning in practise: while the peak bodies have a strong advocacy role, they cannot create change on their own. They require the individuals and organisations that they represent to also be very active in this process. They need our energy and drive and voices. They also cannot know the issues without us informing them. As we are in the situation, we are the experts.

Developing a Mission related to VOICE and a philosophy of Co-operation

Agency representatives attending the first meeting of “VOICE for SONG” expressed relief. At last there was a meeting at which we could be vulnerable regarding our agencies’ struggles. We were united by our concern that we did not have a voice. We were concerned that economic rationalist frameworks were being used by others when considering the future of SNGOs. We felt the culture of silence that had inhibited us from coming together before now needed to change as well as the assumption that large is more “efficient and effective” than small. We needed to be challenging the culture and assumptions at the broader level as well as addressing the specific needs for specific groups at local and regional levels. We realised that SNGOs needed to have a body representing us at the sector level. It was also determined that the lack of support for SNGOs in the wider arena would limit the chances of local strategies achieving success. So the mission of the group became “to ensure the survival and development of small non-government, not-for-profit organisations, through developing and implementing local strategies and promoting the development of a national body to represent SNGOs”.

This mission seeks to challenge the small/large culture. The national body we seek to represent us, does not need to be a national body separate from a peak body. The survival of SNGOs is a national issue. It requires peak body resources at all levels. The private sector has recognised the importance of separate representation according to organisational structure/size.

Achievements and Progress

Simply continuing to exist has been a major achievement for “VOICE for SONG” given the many demands on individuals’ time. As well as developing common goals we have developed a brochure, raised awareness of the issues formally and informally at meetings and conferences as well as published articles in newsletters.

Three of the organisations participating in “VOICE for SONG” held a joint AGM/forum with the theme “VOICE, Value, Co-operation and Survival of SNGOs”. Eighty people attended this forum. As well as speakers from “VOICE for SONG”, there were speakers from WSCF, NCOSS, Blacktown-Mt Druitt Community and Allied Health, Western Sydney Regional Chamber of Commerce and NSW Mission Australia - a LNGO. The speakers were chosen to demonstrate our philosophy of co-operation between large and small, community, public and private sectors. Most of the speakers were Director/General Managers of their organisations who also had formal power and influence to support further action.

Soon after the forum, Unis Goh, General Manager of NSW Mission Australia, the LNGO representative and speaker, liaised with Gary Moore, Director of NCOSS to determine ways in which they and their organisations could be proactive in providing support for our cause. The first step has involved both of them attending a meeting at BADFS. Unis acknowledged the power differential between our large and small organisations. She insisted that Gary and herself travel the one hour journey to BADFS for the meeting, rather expecting me to go to them, to demonstrate their intention of a relationship of equality.

Gary Moore also recently left NCOSS. At his farewell function, he was again proactive in furthering our cause by inviting myself as a speaker from a SNGO along with the speaker from an LNGO. Criticisms before now have been that LNGOs are speaking on behalf of the sector, with little input from SNGOs, at such sector wide events. Gary's farewell was a first for having speakers from these two organisational types at a sector wide event. In addition, others influenced by the awareness raising have organised conferences/forums on the small organisational issue.

NCOSS is now involved in "VOICE for SONG" activities. A range of other Peak bodies and individuals from organisations beyond Western Sydney are now also contacting us to be involved and support our mission. We are now being asked to make presentations at a range of events and write articles for a range of publications. We are unable to handle the demand for our input.

The awareness raising has clearly been successful. There is now support within the community sector for the survival of SNGOs. This support is a long way from the irritation and frustration we experienced several years ago when raising these issues within the sector.

What has contributed to the VOICE of SNGOs being heard ?

Structurally, SNGOs have the least power of organisational types in a climate that values profit over non-profit and large over small. Power or influence is required to change the situation for small organisations so a major part of this task has been and continues to be to overcome this power imbalance. Individuals and organisations commonly have power through resources, skills and formal means. Power can also be gained in other ways, including accessing these through others. (Mintzberg 1983 : 24). An individual SNGO has limited resources, a limited pool of skills within the organisation, and little formal power at the sector level. In comparison a government department and an LNGO has more of these types of power. Many peak bodies are small organisations. However, in comparison to a SNGO they have more formal power through their presence and input at high level meetings. "VOICE for SONG" has been developing other power bases as well as using our networks to gain resources, skills and have an influence at formal levels. By coming together collectively and gaining a stronger voice, we are increasingly accumulating power to address our issues of survival.

The formation of "VOICE for SONG" was the beginning of developing a powerbase. As individual agency representatives, we were no longer alone. We could share our skills, resources and energies in addressing organisational survival. Organisational vulnerability was no longer being identified as an issue specific to a particular organisation, but to an organisational type – a SNGO. This was automatically making it safer to name or voice our concerns.

The support from Western Sydney Community Forum was also critical. The acknowledgment and support from this peak body helped validate SNGOs concerns. WSCF has also lobbied for “VOICE for SONG” in wider arenas. Links and partnerships with others at local, regional, state and national levels have been and continue to be a source of support for our cause and for our voice being heard. In addition, without email “VOICE for SONG” could not have achieved as much as it has – and may not even have continued to exist. With no additional resources to support the co-ordination of this group, email has been critical for the group to maintain communication. It has supported participation by addressing some of the resource and networking limitations of SNGOs.

Power for us has also been gained through “meaning” – by us defining the problem, rather than accepting others’ definition of the problem. Rather than locating the problem as being with SNGOs, we have used our voice to locate the problem with the competitive climate, culture of silence around organisational vulnerability, attitudes and the lack of understanding and value of SNGOs. Power has been gained by identifying viability of SNGOs as being related to the big picture. While a mission that challenges the small/large culture might seem to some as too big - it educates many to think differently about the issues.

We have also used our voice or influence within a philosophy of social capital. We seek to maintain or develop trust with small, large, public, community and private sector organisations. An important part of this is being able to raise difficult and conflictual issues. “Trust must be the basis of healthy debate in a truly civil society. There is nothing wrong with dissent, debate or conflict when they are based on mutual respect and trust.” (Cox 1995, Lecture 5: 1) While we have stated our concerns with regard to the trends that are increasing the gap between LNGOs and SNGOs, we also recognise the value of LNGOs and also the support we have always received from them. We welcome LNGOs into the debate and we seek to continue to co-operate with them. This co-operative philosophy also supports peak bodies, who represent both large and SNGOs, to continue to service the needs of both these groups

Commitment and passion by those represented in “VOICE for SONG” has been a key ingredient for the success so far of this group. Paid and unpaid hours have been required for our activities. For all of us in “VOICE for SONG” participation comes without any guarantee that there will be financial rewards for our particular organisation. Other SNGOs may benefit from our work. Clearly, commitment, passion and a willingness to move beyond our boundaries have been key ingredients to the success so far of our activities.

Conclusion and Directions

The voice of SNGOs is important at many levels. This voice can have the power to make a difference at the local as well as the big picture levels. This voice can have an influence on issues for specific communities at local and national levels as well as on broader structural issues. Clearly, the activities of “VOICE for SONG” is an example of the latter.

The voice of SNGOs closes the power differential between small and large. Our voice has also been strengthened by having a philosophy of co-operation with others. We are now being heard and supported by many in the community sector. It is now time to have our voice heard by public and private sectors as well as the general community. We also

now need resources to further our movement as well as to address some of the survival and development issues needed at the local level.

We are in a time when many of us feel we are powerless in the face of the wider forces. We feel we cannot influence the economy, the competitive climate, that we are cut adrift in a society dominated by the profit-motive. Recognising the influence the voice of SNGOs can have within the community sector, can perhaps give us a sense of the potential for SNGOs and LNGOs to come together and join our voices in influencing the sort of society we really want to live in. Maybe it is possible to use our voices to develop partnerships and relationships with the public and private sectors and the general community that truly come with mutual respect and value the diversity and not-for-profit motives of the community sector. Beyond this we can exert our influence in engaging society as a whole in not-for-profit, social justice and environmentally sustainable activities.

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