

Voice for SONG article for Community Management:

(DRAFT)

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Many small organisations are doing great work in their local communities creating innovations and models that are little known in the broader media. A collaboration of workers formed in 2005 to do something about this. Calling themselves *Voice for SONG (small organisations non-government)*, they set about promoting the innovations and flexibility of smaller structures, the added value of local knowledge and networks and importance of maintaining a diverse community sector. In challenging narrow notions of 'efficiency' and promoting the value of small community organisations, SONG members focus on bringing about attitudinal and cultural change.

Central to SONG philosophy is the premises that small locally based community organisations play an integral role in the building and maintenance of healthy democratic local communities.

Western Sydney Community Forum Executive Officer Mary Waterford is a founding member of the SONG coalition and WSCF provide leadership and secretariat support to the on-going work.

Mary says

'When SONG began I was working for a small local organisation with core funding of less than \$100,000 pa. Yet I knew we had an excellent reputation regionally for our work developing a well networked, collaborative community services sector, reconciliation projects, new models of community cultural development on mental health issues and advocacy on multicultural issues and that we were respected by all levels of government. Another SONG member had 10 staff funded by 9 grants and was developing a groundbreaking model of collaboration on drug and alcohol impact on families and communities. It was clear we were valuable! Yet our innovation was often invisible outside of our fields and government was increasingly awarding tenders to state-wide organisations.

It is important that we maintain a diverse community sector with a range of locally managed players as well as larger organisations such as the charities. The smaller local organisations have valuable networks and insights into communities, the larger charities often have access to wider research and resources. Small organisations can be seen by government as problematic to administer due to their numbers but it must be recognised that their access to local networks and range of community involvement opportunities can add great value to the experience of someone linking to their services. These organisations can break down isolation and enable people to get involved in local community activities at many different levels.

I think the focus on SONG has much to offer discussion about how we encourage people to be citizens rather than consumers. Peak bodies such as WSCF have an important role to play in promoting the value of thinking 'small and local' and encouraging the organisations themselves to value their contribution."

What is valuable about small local community managed human service organisations? Voice for SONG members have identified the following:

- Small local community organisations are vehicles for participation in decision making - we further grassroots democracy and independent groups at the local level.
- Small local community organisations are generally guided by social justice, environmental sustainability, not-for-profit and democratic values and promote the need for independent voices that represent the diversity of groups in our society.
- Service delivery is often what we do but it isn't who we are – local community organisations are set up by people enthusiastic about their community and determined to make things better. We strengthen local communities as we advocate for good social policy to enable appropriate services for the most vulnerable.
- We work with innovation, flexibility and responsiveness to addressing social justice issues, often with limited resources. Along the way we build social capital. We promote not-for-profit values at a time when our society is increasingly dominated by the profit motive.
- We have limited bureaucracy and responsive decision making processes.
- We encourage cooperation above competition and build social sustainability, trust, cooperation and mutually supportive activities in and between our organisations and communities.
- We provide infrastructure to enable many skilled and innovative volunteers to make major contributions to our society through their work in many different parts of the service and advocacy sector.
- We employ many skilled, innovative and highly motivated paid workers with commitment and experience. We often have staff that choose to remain long-term in the sector, despite poor conditions, as they see social change is best implemented at the grass roots level. Their social entrepreneur skills are often used to great advantage in local structures.
- Our organisations often provide the entry point for new workers to the human services sector. They gain experience that can inform their practice throughout their career.
- We empower communities by facilitating flexible, responsive, independent projects and have the flexibility to nurture small ideas that may grow into large projects.
- We develop and support local networks and link people, working to promote local assets and attributes.

- Diverse and marginalised communities are usually represented.
- Small local organisations have a role in 'new generation' community innovations to combat the effects of climate change, build local community capacity, skills of residents and developing infrastructure for disadvantaged.
- We knit communities together with multiple levels of relationships and networks, creating community harmony and addressing community conflict.
- We use minimal resources to get around because we are usually working locally.
- We value "small" in our society at a time when structures and organisations are becoming larger.

The Voice for SONG coalition presents at Conferences and has released several booklets, including SONG Issues paper and "Think Local". These can be downloaded from the Western Sydney Community Forum website www.wscf.org.au TRI Community Exchange, another active partner in Voice for SONG maintains a blog in which articles promoting small organisations are collected <http://voiceforsong.blogspot.com/>

The University of Western Sydney has been a string supporter of Voice for SONG. WSCF and UWS are currently partners in research "Identifying, evaluating and recording the importance of process in small community organisations' as part of the evidence collecting on the impact of the work of SONGs.

In a nutshell ... small local community organisations contribute in the following ways

Social Capital	Financial capital
<p>By building stronger communities:-</p> <p>We provide access to programs, resources and support for youth, families, children, older people and people with a disability, and other minority or vulnerable groups, which enable them to pursue quality of life.</p> <p>We capitalise on the experience, skills, passions and commitment of community members to develop a range of local projects and services.</p> <p>Organisations bring new ideas and expertise into the local Government areas, which lead to a greater range of culture, services and opportunities for residents.</p> <p>We work to develop inclusiveness, tolerance and community harmony.</p> <p>We contribute to building relationships based on reciprocity</p>	<p>Community organisations receive recurrent funding for services: in each local government area, neighbourhood centres bring approximately four million dollars per annum into the local economy and they are just one service type amongst many.</p> <p>Additionally community organisations seek funding for new ventures and projects and take up opportunities offered by State and Federal programs.</p> <p>Management Committees contribute thousands of voluntary hours to meet the requirements of government including local government.</p> <p>We promote a sense of belonging in the community, which contributes to individuals taking responsibility for community resources and assets.</p>
<p>By building networks and linking people together</p> <p>We promote social cohesion, citizenship and a sense of community.</p> <p>We create and maintain strategies to link residents with an extensive network of services and we collaborate to maximise resources.</p>	<p>Community organisations are a major employer - 7% of the workforce contributing 7.5% of GDP.</p> <p>We also provide training and support for volunteers, students and others seeking to increase their employment opportunities.</p> <p>We maximise the use of resources.</p>
<p>By nurturing volunteer involvement</p> <p>We provide opportunities, which increase skills, social wellbeing and a sense of value and participation.</p>	<p>Voluntary employment often leads to paid employment.</p> <p>Skills add to the wealth of the community</p> <p>Volunteers save the community many thousands of dollars.</p>
<p>By providing information and services</p> <p>We develop and maintain essential community services that enable local residents to lead full participatory lives (eg childcare, housing, emergency support).</p> <p>Community organisations facilitate the spread of local information to local people.</p>	<p>Community services work with both crisis and preventative strategies. Preventative strategies save community funds and resources.</p> <p>Local community organisations promote the resources of an area, enabling residents to find the services they need.</p>