

**Voice for SONG**

# **The way forward:**

Tackling the issues confronting  
small community organisations.

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## Voice for SONG’s Way Forward: tackling the issues confronting small community organisations

### Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<b>Small community organisations</b> .....	5
Background to Voice for SONG .....	5
<b>Who we are talking about and why we are valuable</b> .....	7
Who we are .....	7
What is valuable about small community based human service organisations? .....	8
Characteristics of the small community based, human service organisations .....	9
What we do .....	10
<b>Major Issues</b> .....	13
Invisibility of small organisations and lack of understanding of their value and potential .....	14
Recruitment and retention of skilled workers. ....	17
Inadequate funding and multiple accountabilities .....	19
Government trend to fund one large regional project rather than several small projects across localities. ....	21
Expectation to manage short term projects and be sustainable through private sector funding .....	23
Stresses on Community Management. ....	26
<b>Voice for SONG and Peak Bodies</b> .....	28
<b>The success of the Voice for SONG strategy</b> .....	30
<b>Opportunities</b> .....	31
<b>Moving Forward/Conclusion</b> .....	32
<b>Resources used in developing this Issues Paper</b> .....	34

# Introduction

This paper has been produced by Voice for SONG (for small organisations non-government), a network of individuals and organisations, particularly small community organisations. This paper is a revised and updated version of the original SONG Issues Paper that was prepared for a community sector roundtable in July 2005. This roundtable led to the formation of Voice for SONG NSW, with NCOSS (Council of Social Services of NSW) agreeing to provide the secretariat for the group.

This paper:

- illustrates why small community organisations are valuable
- describes some of the impacts on their wellbeing and some recommendations to address these impacts
- introduces Voice for SONG and its ideas for moving forward to increase awareness of the value of small community organisations and increase cooperation between small community organisations, large non-government organisations (NGOs), government, business and the general community
- describes the collaborative and complementary role of Voice for SONG in relation to peak bodies (bodies that represent community sector organisations).

The paper has a NSW perspective but the issues we highlight are global issues, identified in other states and countries. For instance, the Canadian paper Voluntary Sector Initiative Report “Caught in the Middle: What small, non-profit organizations need to survive and flourish” (Voluntary Sector Secretariat, December 2001) is an example of this.

# Small community organisations

Small community organisations are essential for the maintenance of healthy local communities. They promote social justice, the building of social capital, cooperation between people in different communities and sectors, democracy and other values related to not-for-profit activities. Small community organisations are well placed to know their local communities, networks and culture, and have working relationships across a range of local services and agencies. Small community organisations ensure the valuing of all community members, with a particular focus on disadvantaged communities and individuals. They provide infrastructure and innovation that allows people to contribute their time and skills to participate in their community and develop community identity, creativity and connectedness. They often provide a vehicle for leadership locally and in the broader sector.

The ongoing survival and vibrancy of small organisations is paramount to the general health of communities and democratic processes.

## **Background to Voice for SONG**

Voice for SONG (for small organisations non-government) is a collaboration of small community organisations and others concerned with promoting the value of small organisations to a healthy, democratic, vibrant, inclusive society.

Voice for SONG is about more than promoting the survival and development of small NGOs. It also promotes social justice, environmental sustainability, social capital, shared power and leadership, and not-for-profit activities. Voice for SONG formed to develop and maintain structures and activities that support and promote these values and influence healthy, connected communities.

Voice for SONG began in 2000 when several organisations from the western suburbs of Sydney came together because their futures were uncertain. Their funding in real terms was gradually being whittled away and they were missing out on new funding sources. They perceived a culture of a lack of understanding of the value of small community organisations and a lack of commitment to sustain them in a competitive climate that was valuing large organisations over small organisations. The efficiencies and effectiveness of small organisations were not recognised and accountability requirements were becoming unrealistically onerous.

Voice for SONG has engaged many other small organisations (and peak bodies and larger organisations). As well as supporting each other, the groups, through their collective voice, began to promote the value of small community organisations through public forums and the media. Voice for SONG has also acted as a catalyst for initiatives such as LCSA's publication *Odd Socks: Why the Future of Small Community Organisations is Critical*, and the Small Organisations Working Together (SNOW) Project. Voice for SONG has also been invited to, and spoken at, many conferences.

Voice for Song has gone from a Blacktown initiative to a statewide initiative demonstrating that even though small community organisations generally have the least status and power of all organisations, they can have significant influence.

In challenging narrow notions of "efficiency" and promoting the value of small community organisations, Voice for SONG has been bringing about attitudinal and cultural change.

# Who we are talking about and why we are valuable

*“Small organisations have an important role in mobilising existing social capital and creating more. Social capital is generated through the networks, local values and trust that exist in community. (Onyx & Williams 2002)”*

## Who we are

The types of organisations covered in this discussion are funded human and community services organisations. They are mostly small and localised and include:

- > neighbourhood centres;
- > youth centres;
- > refuges (youth, women’s, family);
- > family support services;
- > information and resource services;
- > home based/community services to frail aged and people with different abilities;
- > migrant resource and direct ethnic and refugee support services;
- > indigenous locally based services;
- > community arts organisations;
- > community children’s services;
- > community legal services;
- > employment and training support services;
- > community based women’s health centres;
- > domestic violence and child protection services;
- > drug & alcohol services;
- > housing support services;
- > community mental health services
- > or a combination of many of the above. Larger neighbourhood centres, larger community legal centres and community housing associations are also part of this discussion paper.

All of these organisations are funded from one or many different government funding programmes at local, state and federal level.

## What is valuable about small community based human service organisations?

- > Small community based organisations are generally guided by social justice, environmental sustainability, peace, not-for-profit and democratic values and promote the need for independent voices that represent the diversity of groups in our society.
- > We work with innovation, flexibility and responsiveness to addressing social capital and social justice issues, often with limited resources.
- > We promote not-for-profit values at a time when our society is increasingly dominated by the profit motive.
- > We have limited bureaucracy and more responsive decision making processes.
- > We further grassroots democracy and independent bodies at the local level.
- > We encourage cooperation above competition and build social capital, trust, cooperation and mutually supportive activities in and between our organisations and communities.
- > We employ many skilled, innovative and highly motivated paid workers with commitment and experience. We often have staff that choose to remain in the sector, despite poor conditions, as they see social change is best implemented at the grass roots level. Their social entrepreneur skills can be used to advantage in small structures.
- > Small organisations often provide the entry point for new workers to the sector. They gain experience that can inform their practice throughout their career.
- > We support many skilled and innovative volunteers who make major contributions to our society through their work in small NGOs.
- > 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.
- > Diverse and marginalised communities are usually represented.
- > We value “small” in our society at a time when structures and organisations are becoming larger.

## **Characteristics of the small community based, human service organisations**

- 1.** Geographically we are diverse: from suburban, rural, local, to regional and some statewide areas.
- 2.** We range in size: some have incomes as small as under \$50,000pa to some receiving up to one million dollars. Some have a sole worker, while others have between twenty and thirty workers. There are a sizeable number of middle sized organisations in our sector.
- 3.** We are community managed by democratically elected management committees. Most are incorporated associations.
- 4.** We have membership and volunteers and participation is encouraged through committee & volunteer work.
- 5.** We have multiple partnerships & funding accountabilities: most income comes from government funding and most small organisations manage a range of projects over several funding bodies.
- 6.** We have legislative accountability and corporate accountability in multiple forms and employ staff and meet all legislative requirements.
- 7.** We cover a diversity of client groups, often the most disadvantaged and marginalised in the community.
- 8.** Service development, community development and social justice emphasis: the commitment to social justice, responding to existing and emerging needs

and the framework of participation and empowerment are part of the essential ways of working of this sector.

See Appendix for more details.

NCOSS research *Alive and Well (2003)* includes a summary of the fifth “Australians Living on the Edge” survey of organisations in the community services sector in NSW and compares the findings with National organisational respondents. In that survey, organisations in NSW representing incomes under \$1 million were 87% of the total, while nationally respondents from small organisations were 83% of total. The patterns are similar. Their reliance on government funding represented 76.6% of their total incomes in NSW and 74.2% nationally.

## What we do

As small community based human service organisations, we are mostly engaged in a combination of efforts toward:

- Being concerned primarily with the needs of people in their communities of locality and/or interest who do not readily access services or participate in their communities as active members. These individuals, families and sometimes groups are often in crisis, with fewer financial and emotional resources, genuinely marginalised and disadvantaged;
- Service development, management, direction setting, local needs based assessment direct delivery of a range of services to particular client groups;
- Responsiveness to emerging needs of their clients and local communities of interest;
- Developing and using capacity to be creative and innovative;
- Minimal layers of decision making;
- Cooperative networking with each other -including inter-agency cooperation;
- Enhancing our communities of locality and/or interest(s);

- With local people, building social capacity through community development to address and work towards redressing the problems and disadvantage experienced by marginalised individuals, families and groups of people in the Australian community;
- Influencing policy and communication of local needs and issues through regional structures. These needs and issues can be of national concern.

As small locality focused human service organisations, we have an intimate knowledge of our communities; we are flexible and able to be innovative in response to emerging needs. We also have a commitment to community involvement in decision making through management committees and other participatory processes. Finally our commitment to an ethos of social justice and community development practice often sets us apart from other types of local community organisations.

*It is often small organisations who summon the courage and determination to raise issues, and to organise meetings with politicians, peak bodies and regional bodies to have their concerns listened to and to develop cooperative strategies. This requires time and energy with little or no financial assistance to support these strategies. These organisations can often work with great flexibility as they don't have multiple layers of decision making prohibiting them from being spokespeople for marginalised communities (Suhood 2000b).*

At the Communities in Control Conference in Melbourne in 1994, Professor Berkman of Harvard University told the conference:

*Community organisations have the power to tangibly improve population health. In this case, what's good for individuals and what's good for the community is the same thing. Those with the most social 'connectedness', i.e. who have a high level of participation in social and community organisation and networks, have lower mortality rates...Community groups are the engines that drive our ability to change behaviour, reduce morbidity, expand life-expectancy and innovate change (Our Community 2004).*

It is through our service provision, research, outreach, advocacy and the community development efforts of our small community based, human service organisations, that many individuals in need are able to experience their first opportunity for 'connectedness'. They are treated in an inclusive manner, with a non-discriminatory

attitude and with respect and dignity for their human rights and their right to participate actively in meeting their own needs by people employed to support their needs, and concerns.

Professor Jenny Onyx (2002) highlights why the survival of small community organisations is critical:

*There are some distinctive characteristics about these small organisations that enable them to act in ways that larger, more bureaucratic organisations can't match. They are likely to have their ears to the ground in ways few organisations do. They hear the distress and name it before others are even aware there is a problem. They can, and often do, mobilise an instant response to that issue by way of emergency support, advocacy, information, preparing a submission to government, or establishing a service on a volunteer basis. The form of the response is as varied as the need. There is no need to fit the response into a pre-existing program category. Indeed...they have the flexibility to respond as required. As human beings our needs are complex and part of a whole. Very often attempts to make these conform to the requirements of silo bureaucracies serves only to distort and fracture our experience.*

Despite the important value and activity of small community organisations in NSW, many such organisations report major challenges and difficulties in continuing their work.

## Major Issues

- 1.** Invisibility of small organisations and lack of understanding of their value and potential;
- 2.** Recruitment and retention of skilled workers;
- 3.** Inadequacy of funding and multiple accountabilities across programs;
- 4.** Short term project funding and expectation to be sustainable through private sector funding;
- 5.** Government trend to fund one large regional project rather than several small organisations;
- 6.** Stresses on Community Management.

# Issue 1

## **Invisibility of small organisations and lack of understanding of their value and potential.**

This is the key challenge of the Voice for SONG strategy. Small community organisations have a low profile and status with government decision-makers and even within the community.

### **Background Reasons/Concerns:**

- In each local government area there may be over 100 small community organisations in urban areas and 5-20 in smaller rural communities. Given there are over 150 local government areas in New South Wales alone the figures are significant. However, these small organisations have not been promoted with a common voice, and our media profile is disparate.
- There is very little research on small locally managed human service organisations or on the impact of small organisations on their client groups and communities. Many small community organisations are developing innovative and successful approaches that are used as models in other areas. There is little recognition of the role small organisations play in developing new ways of working with disadvantaged communities.
- There is no representative voice for small organisations. They are subsumed in a range of different peak and/or regional organisations, or may not belong to any because of cost of membership fees. Peaks represent both large and small organisations and often the level of support required for many struggling organisations is problematic. A sense of vulnerability constrains many community organisations from speaking out. Fears of government funding cuts prevent agencies from being good advocates for themselves and the sector.

### **Resulting Impacts on small community organisations**

Small community organisations can be undervalued and their potential underestimated by themselves, government and decision-makers. Small community organisations experience

uncertainty in regard to their future owing to inadequate funding and policies and limited support and attention. Recruitment and retention of staff is affected by lack of value of the impact of the work of small community organisations as well as the insecurity of funding.

Small community organisations often allocate significant resources to developing funding applications only to have their auspice overlooked in favour of larger organisations. Government decision-makers often hold inaccurate, poorly informed images of management practises of small community organisations.

#### **Possible Responses:**

- 1.** Resources allocated for a dedicated Voice for SONG position to coordinate future work;
- 2.** Stakeholders to further develop strategies, including media strategies to increase profile and promote the value of small community organisations;
- 3.** Organise forums and conferences or conference sessions on the value and potential of small community organisations. Ensure adequate representation from small community organisations as speakers and facilitators;
- 4.** Academics to set up research strategies to document the value and scope of the work of small organisations;
- 5.** Stakeholders to engage with government departments around the broader value and potential of allocating resources to small community organisations and to build trust;
- 6.** Dialogue to be developed between small and large NGOs with the express purpose of looking at ways to work together;
- 7.** Promotion of innovative and successful models from small community organisations;
- 8.** Encouragement of a stronger role for local government in promoting their local community organisations;

9. Resources to assist representation from small community organisations for particular working parties or conferences.

## Issue 2

### Recruitment and retention of skilled workers.

Recruitment and retention of skilled workers - managers, project/program coordinators, direct delivery workers, administrators and management committees is critical to the success of small community based NGOs.

#### Background Reasons/Concerns:

- The NGO sector is often the entry point and training ground for human services workers. Losing experienced workers is problematic to this sector;
- The public sector is more highly paid and better resourced than the non-government community sector. Many workers are lost to the government sector as rates of pay and career pathways are not equitable across sectors;
- Staff from NGOs are often seconded to short term government positions, which can provide experience for the worker but create great difficulty for the organisation and the sector;
- Provision of training and professional development is not adequately funded.

#### Resulting impacts on small NGOs

Staff change impacts significantly on the sector. A manager position may hold core leadership in the organisation and community workers often have strong links into the community. Recruitment is not just replacement of staff but the building of trust and connection. Longevity of staff is important to the strength of local organisations.

Lack of career pathways and poor wages and conditions discourage skilled workers from staying in small NGOs.

Transportability of skills is an issue where there is little money available for professional development.

**Possible responses:**

- 1.** The Australian Services Union and government funding providers must address the disparity in pay and conditions between community agencies and the public sector.
- 2.** Innovative ways to second workers between community organisations and government departments should be developed. For instance the creation of a list of skilled, experienced people willing to work as locums backed by earmarked funds for higher wages could assist to alleviate the negative impact of secondment.
- 3.** Funding providers need to invest in learning and development towards positive governance and effective human and financial resource management.

## Issue 3

### Inadequate funding and multiple accountabilities

Major funding programs such as Department of Community Services (DoCS) Community Services Grants Program (CSGP) have not had an increase in core funding since 1989. Different and multiple accountability processes from different government funding programs is also a major issue.

#### Background Reasons/Concerns:

- There are historical anomalies of service funding that date back to the early 1980's. Funding programs of human services departments such as DoCS, Health, DADHC each have different formulas to allocate funding. Federal government departments fund inconsistently across areas.
- There is a lack of recognition of the cost of management. CSGP has not had an increase in core funding in 15 years, yet it provides the core management role of many small organisations and supports a range of other programs. Management accountability responsibilities have increased greatly in this time.
- Most small organisations receive funding from a range of programs. One SONG member organisation has ten staff and nine funding sources - this is not unique. Most organisations have at least three funding sources. Each program has its own accountability requirements necessitating management time and responsibility.
- There is little research on differential funding levels both geographically, or within similar service areas, or in terms of reasonable levels of funding required to maintain current service levels. There are no comparisons between the value of "big" versus "small".
- NCOSS has worked with the NSW Government to reduce compliance costs across funding programs. Whilst results are still scant on the ground, it is important to note that concerted effort is being made with the centre of Government and that there is some support within Government for reducing the scandalous level of inappropriate compliance requirements.

## **Resulting Impact on small NGOs**

Small community organisations are struggling to provide viable management and administrative support to existing core services and have increasing difficulty in supporting the management of additional project funding, or new service program needs. The trend towards fixed term funding impacts negatively on management and planning for small NGOs.

Funding disparity mean that for instance some programs / organisations are funded for administration and rent and others are not.

### **Possible Responses:**

- 1.** Increase in CSGP and other core funding across the state to provide accurate funding for management and administration.
- 2.** Development of formula approaches for appropriate core funding for different types of services in different localities sources and outcome requirements of Government departments.
- 3.** Research into the funding inequities that exist.

## Issue 4

### **Government trend to fund one large regional project rather than several small projects across localities.**

The trend of government funding towards larger organisations puts pressure on small community based NGOs to build consortiums, amalgamate or miss out. The current political and economic environment values “large” over “small. This trend can result in a loss of diversity in services, loss of grassroots participation in decision making and loss of commitment to working towards common community goals. It appears to be in contradiction to the express commitment of government to strengthening communities and building capacity.

#### **Background Reasons/Concerns:**

- Government departments and decision makers often favour funding large organisations over small. The Industry Assistance Commission (1994) estimated that very small agencies comprised around 30% of the sector but received less than 2% of all government funding. By contrast very large organisations comprised less than 0.5% of the sector but received 28% of available funding. The sheer size of the sector is one reason that Government Departments want to deal with fewer individual organisations in terms of accountability and similarity of standards of service delivery.
- There is a lack of understanding and appreciation by decision-makers of the breadth of benefits that productive small organisations bring to local communities, economies and infrastructure. And there is a lack understanding and trust of the particular strengths of small NGOs by many government bureaucrats.
- There is a lack of understanding by current government departments of the history, credibility and spirit of diversity of the many smaller organisations that arose from local community pressure of needs.
- Government departments are increasing their demands for services to look the same - professional standards, evaluation processes, strategic plans, performance indicators, and other measures in order to prove their worthiness for ongoing assistance.

- > Often decisions are made by senior levels of government to only fund a project across a region, restricting the possibility of community input into service delivery in their local area (for instance the Western Sydney Aboriginal Child Youth and Family Strategy).

#### **Resulting impact on small NGOs:**

Small NGOs are being pressured to form consortiums or compete with each other regarding expressions of interest and competitive tendering.

Small NGOs can be by-passed for funding, even when they are already doing fine work in the area nominated by the funding program.

#### **Possible Responses:**

- 1.** Meetings need to take place with larger organisations through peaks or FONGA to facilitate understanding and develop cooperation between small organisations and government departments. Strategies need to be developed to facilitate better understanding and trust that permeates all levels of bureaucracy
- 2.** The market needs to be managed in such a way that Government gives some structural guarantees that small NGOs will get a fair share of tenders etc. (NCOSS believes that this is essential if we are to arrest the policy directions that Government funders are continuing to take)
- 3.** There needs to be more comparative research assessing the different impact and costing structures on the community of small compared to large organisations
- 4.** The value of small NGOs must be documented for their broader contribution to social justice and capacity building in communities

## Issue 5

### Expectation to manage short term projects and be sustainable through private sector funding

More and more funding programs are one to three years' duration with an expectation that outcomes will be sustainable.

#### Background Reasons/Concerns:

- Government bodies are moving more towards fixed term funding that is outcome prescriptive. Program funding has increasingly become one to three years. Government priorities and plans will often change within the period so that projects may not be able to re-new their funding at the end of the period, regardless of the quality of outcomes.
- Funding for innovation or new projects is almost non-existent. There is increased reliance on funding from schemes such as CDSE (Community Development Expenditure Scheme), although this scheme does not have equitable resources across NSW. The 'mutilation by 1,000 cuts' of the Area Assistance Scheme has had major impact on the sector's ability to develop sustainable projects, which in turn has impacted on marginalised communities.
- There is a significant trend in the social policy arena today for greater corporate responsibility, mutual obligation, and partnerships. Private sector fundraising and partnerships with business are perceived as desirable for small NGOs to provide sustainability for their future. Some issues have 'more appeal' to private sector for funding. Local needs may not be addressed as private sector often wants their 'pet project' undertaken.
- Tax deductibility status (DGR) is inequitably and illogically spread across the sector (three of six neighbourhood centres in one area have it, the others determined ineligible).

## Resulting impacts on small NGOs

Short term funding has major impact on small organisation's ability to plan and maintain quality staff. Financial viability can be threatened as projects come and go.

There is a tension for small NGOs between demonstrating capacity in applying for new grants and the time and work involved in each EOI.

Outcome focussed funding does not allow organisations to work within their own frame of reference and their reason for being. Government driven agendas are not necessarily the agendas of the service organisations that already exist.

Ownership of projects may be taken away from the organisation and promoted more formally by government and private sector who want the kudos and 'brands' applied to any advertising or products of the service (Families First for instance).

Larger corporations want bigger, newer partnerships. What is of benefit locally is often not a 'big enough profile' at the corporate level. The efforts required to compete for corporate money detracts/constrains service delivery to existing clients/communities, and often goes not gain local results.

### Possible Responses:

- 1.** Research needs to be undertaken to evaluate the value and impact of short term funding.
- 2.** More funding programs to be open to broader outcomes.
- 3.** All organisations in the human service arena need tax deductibility status to attract donations and to be able to apply for money from philanthropic trusts.
- 4.** Studies need to be undertaken to explore models of 'whole of community' approach not just 'whole of government'. This could mean that public and private sector work together to develop a compact and establish structures that would foster a more diverse range of funding sources administered in a variety of ways so that small human service organisations can be considered according to their needs.

5. Studies need to be undertaken to establish models of corporate partnerships that take account of smaller organisations and locally identified priorities.

## Issue 6

### Stresses on Community Management.

Community management as a model of governance is both a strength and a weakness of the sector but there is little recognition and valuing of the many benefits to local communities and a significant tool of capacity building and community strengthening.

#### Background Reasons/Concerns:

- Community management is the means by which local people can directly participate in the direction of their community service organisation and needs to be valued more by government.
- The number and complexity of management tasks and accountability requirements have increased dramatically in the past decade. The level of knowledge and skill required of committees and paid managers is significantly greater.
- There are inherent dilemmas in clients/volunteers participating in management, however the “greater good” is to support and empower their participation for the skills that can develop from this experience.
- Marginalised groups, especially indigenous groups, can have the greatest difficulties in managing an organisation due to varying levels of skills, access to information and pressures in the individuals in their daily lives. Yet it is these communities where it is most important to have community based self-determining services and projects.

#### Resulting impact on small NGOs:

There are increased responsibilities on managers and service coordinators, as well as committee members, given the increased legislative and funding accountability requirements.

The demands to run “like a business is killing many small organisations who cannot or will not comply ... as complying may mean losing the soul of a caring community (Onyx & Williams 2002)”.

**Possible Responses:**

- 1.** Research into and promotion of models working in local areas to support marginalised communities in managing their projects eg ATSI organisations.
- 2.** Government to resource regional and local structures with management training and resourcing as an ongoing need and not a one off funding option.
- 3.** TAFES and universities and peak bodies need to develop sustainable resourcing links with local organisations re community management.
- 4.** Recognition of the financial costs of accountability requirements means more funding is required for administration both financial and general in formulas for funding small NGOs.
- 5.** Conglomerate models of management at the local level need to be further researched for their value eg NSW Women’s Refuge Network is now sponsoring a number of refuges through critical phases. There needs to be an evaluation of this strategy including the loss of community members participating in the direction and management of these organisations.

## Voice for SONG and Peak Bodies

As stated previously Voice for SONG's role is complementary to the role of the NCOSS and other peak bodies.

Voice for SONG recognises that NCOSS and other peaks have always, and will continue to, advocate for small community organisations.

Voice for SONG emerged from the realisation that despite the advocacy of peak bodies the direct voice of small community organisations was often missing from key policy meetings, papers and conferences that were influencing the future of small community organisations. The reasons for this included:

small community organisations having perceived lower status than other organisational types

small community organisations having minimal resources to participate

most small community organisations not seeing their role as involving advocacy and liaison at the state sector level and the forming of relationships with high level decision-makers, as such activities compete for time and energy with local service delivery goals

the value, efficiencies and effectiveness of small community organisations were not adequately appreciated.

Because of the lack of understanding of small community organisations and their value, Voice for SONG was formed to support a more comprehensive understanding and to promote inclusion in discussions about their future.

Voice for SONG Strategy has been as follows:

Voice for SONG took on as its main focus raising the profile of small community organisations and promoting the recognition of their value, efficiencies and effectiveness. It did not take up lobbying as its primary focus.

Voice for SONG took into account the climate where councils, government departments and businesses were merging. Voice for Song decided it would not be realistic to use as its

main strategy the lobbying for the survival of small community organisations. Clearly small community organisations and “small” in general were not understood or valued adequately for government decision-makers to determine that the way forward was to separately better resource individual organisations.

Voice for SONG viewed its role of promoting the value, efficiencies and effectiveness of small community organisations as complementing activities carried out by peaks.

Voice for SONG also built cooperative relationships with other small community organisations, peaks, large NGOs, government and business. Voice for SONG has raised conflictual issues but has not been antagonistic and has sought to engage large NGOs, government and business. Rather than criticise large NGOs, Voice for SONG has promoted small NGOs.

Voice for SONG’s resources were limited and the strategy described above was seen as the best way to use the resources.

## The success of the Voice for SONG strategy

Voice for SONG has influenced widespread discussion on the value and issues of small community organisations.

Voice for SONG has been a catalyst for the SNOW Project, the LCSA-Odd Socks and has created a safer environment for small community organisations to raise their issues. Voice for SONG has also been invited to and spoken at many conferences.

*While Voice for SONG has not stopped the government's move towards favouring large NGOs, it has contributed to more discussion and opportunity to challenge the process.*

Voice for SONG has been supported by a range of groups. Without the support of Western Sydney Community Forum, (WSCF), NCOSS and the Local Community Services Association (LCSA) (all from the early stages) and a range of other peaks, as well as large NGOs, government departments including Premiers and DoCS, and also TAFE, Voice for SONG would not still be in existence, and would certainly not now be a statewide initiative.

Peak organisations have been increasingly proactive in working as a part of Voice for SONG to achieve its goals.

The success also needs to be viewed with recognition that Voice for SONG had no resources for coordination and much of the work from Voice for SONG participants has been achieved through unpaid hours.

## Opportunities

(a) If resources had been available in the past 6 years, much more would also have been achieved. There have been many groups and individuals who have wanted to support Voice for SONG but without funded coordination, participation from these groups has not been possible. With the increased recognition of Voice for SONG, the movement to a statewide initiative and increased support from NCOSS, it will now be possible to realise much more.

Much can be achieved through working with NCOSS in a complementary role in the future. Voice for SONG believes that promotion of the value of small community organisations needs to be a key strategy. NCOSS advocates for small organisations but it does not necessarily see the promotion of the value of small community organisations as a key strategy.

NCOSS views its role as:

advocating for managed markets so small community organisations have a future in government funding. This involves government practises that are inclusive of small community organisations

working with clusters of small community organisations for greater capacity

facilitating consensus within the community sector around a common vision in 20 years time, including the role and relationship of and between small, medium and large NGOs.

Voice for SONG will continue to work with NCOSS and other peaks to advocate for more resources for small community organisations so that they can continue to have their independence.

## Moving Forward/Conclusion

Many of the issues raised in this paper have been acknowledged in a number of arenas over many years. Attempts at tackling the issues have been made in various ways through the efforts of many individuals, groups and organisations across community, government and business sectors.

Addressing the issues effectively will involve further cooperation from all sectors - community, government and business. The issues will not be successfully addressed without the inclusion of all community organisations in the cooperative efforts and substantially increased recognition of the value of small community organisations.

Voice for SONG emerged because of the lack of recognition of the value, efficiencies and effectiveness of small community organisations (in an environment where the general trend is to value large organisations over small organisations across all sectors). It promotes and advocates for the inclusion of small community organisations in decision-making processes regarding their future. These issues are part of Issue No. 1: Visibility - described in this report. Therefore in the initial stages Voice for SONG's strongest emphasis will be on the tackling of these issues.

Voice for SONG will therefore seek to ensure healthy democratic, vibrant, inclusive communities through the sustainability of small community organisations by:

promoting the recognition of the value, efficiencies and effectiveness of small community organisations (in a climate that values large organisations over small organisations across all sectors)

being a vehicle for information exchange, discussion, consultation and advocacy on key policy, program and service delivery issues affecting small community human service organisations.

encouraging small community organisations to take leadership roles

connecting and developing cooperative and collaborative relationships between small community organisations, medium and large NGOs, peaks, government, business and the general community to progress issues for small community organisations.

working with key peak groups such as NCOSS to ensure that all levels of government are aware of key policy and sector development issues for small community organisations. While Voice for SONG acknowledges that NCOSS and other peaks have always and will continue to represent and advocate for their member organisations, including small community organisations, Voice for SONG aims to have a complementary and non-competitive role with NCOSS and other peaks. Voice for SONG will lobby NCOSS and other peaks to advocate for the benefit of small community organisations.

being a catalyst that influences others - and/or supporting the efforts of others to take leadership in progressing issues for small community organisations.

There are criticisms of small community organisations. As we progress it is important to have responses to these criticisms.

In the past six years there have certainly been many groups who have indicated a desire to support the cause. However, it has been hard to take up offers as there has been no funding to coordinate action across the sector around representation, recognition, promotion of value, potential and sustainability of small community organisations. Coordination that has taken place has not been part of core funded activities and has added additional stress to individuals and organisations involved. While NCOSS is now providing the secretariat for the group, additional funds and resources are required to support the coordination activities.

The more the value, potential and way forward for small community organisations is clear, the more resources will come to address coordination - and the more small community organisations and the communities they represent will be strengthened.

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