

**Voice for SONG**

# **Think local**

Why local small organisations are important  
to healthy democratic communities  
especially now

# Acknowledgements

Voice for SONG - Small Organisations Non Government - formed in 2000 to highlight the value of the work of small, community managed organisations in the community.

The first SONG Publication *The Way Forward: Tackling the issues confronting small community organisations* was co-written by Tirrania Suhood from Bridges - Blacktown Alcohol & Drugs Family Services; Chris Marks, Consultant and Mary Waterford from Mountains Community Resource Network for a SONG community sector roundtable meeting in July 2005. The SONG Issues Paper was subsequently developed in collaboration with other Voice for SONG members: Jane Uff, TRI Community Exchange; Maree McDermott, South Penrith Youth and Neighbourhood Services; Lauren Harris, Lower Mountains Neighbourhood Centre; Carmen Boserio, Werrington Neighbourhood Centre; Leah Godfrey, Western Sydney Community Forum; Peter Rogers, WESTIR; Nigel Spence, Association of Child Welfare Agencies; and Liz Priestly, NSW Council of Social Services.

*The Way Forward* was revised and updated by Tirrania Suhood and Mary Waterford for sector distribution and discussion in March 2006.

*Think Local* has been adapted by Western Sydney Community Forum in 2008 to focus on the particular value of “local” community organisation. It highlights the particular benefits that grass roots community managed organisations, embedded in local communities, bring to building and maintaining healthy democratic neighbourhoods. It aims to encourage local groups to recognise their value. It is written to articulate the features particular to local organisations and reasons why we need to nurture and strengthen them as a vital core of a healthy diverse service sector.

*Think Local* is a work in progress encouraging you to contribute your stories to this resource. These stories will be available on the Voice for SONG website [www.voiceforsong.com](http://www.voiceforsong.com) creating a rich bank of evidence of the effectiveness of local organisations.

Funded by Western Sydney Community Forum [www.wscf.org.au](http://www.wscf.org.au) 02 9687 9669  
PO Box 208, Parramatta 2124 [wscf@wscf.org.au](mailto:wscf@wscf.org.au)

# Think Local

- > illustrates why small local community organisations are valuable
- > highlights current opportunities for small locally based organisations
- > encourages small local organisations to record their stories so we can develop a comprehensive resource
- > promotes Voice for SONG and its role of increasing awareness of the value of small community organisations.

Small locally based community organisations play an integral role in the building and maintenance of healthy local communities. We promote social and local 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 based 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. We 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. We often provide a vehicle for leadership locally and in the broader sector.

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

*Think Local is a miniature masterpiece* (Peter Shergold, CEO Centre for Social Impact at WSCF AGM and Think Local Launch, 26.11.08)

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

Social Capital	Financial capital
<p>By building stronger communities:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ 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.</li> <li>~ We capitalise on the experience, skills, passions and commitment of community members to develop a range of local projects and services.</li> <li>~ Organisations bring new ideas and expertise into the local Government areas, which lead to a greater range of culture, services and opportunities for residents.</li> <li>~ We work to develop inclusiveness, tolerance and community harmony.</li> <li>~ We contribute to building relationships based on reciprocity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ 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.</li> <li>~ Additionally community organisations seek funding for new ventures and projects and take up opportunities offered by State and Federal programs.</li> <li>~ Management Committees contribute thousands of voluntary hours to meet the requirements of government including local government.</li> <li>~ We promote a sense of belonging in the community, which contributes to individuals taking responsibility for community resources and assets.</li> </ul>
<p>By building networks and linking people together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ We promote social cohesion, citizenship and a sense of community.</li> <li>~ We create and maintain strategies to link residents with an extensive network of services and we collaborate to maximise resources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Community organisations are a major employer -7% of the workforce contributing 7.5% of GDP.</li> <li>~ We also provide training and support for volunteers, students and others seeking to increase their employment opportunities.</li> <li>~ We maximise the use of resources.</li> </ul>
<p>By nurturing volunteer involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ We provide opportunities, which increase skills, social wellbeing and a sense of value and participation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Voluntary employment often leads to paid employment.</li> <li>~ Skills add to the wealth of the community</li> <li>~ Volunteers save the community many thousands of dollars.</li> </ul>
<p>By providing information and services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ We develop and maintain essential community services that enable local residents to lead full participatory lives (eg childcare, housing, emergency support).</li> <li>~ Community organisations facilitate the spread of local information to local people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Community services work with both crisis and preventative strategies. Preventative strategies save community funds and resources.</li> <li>~ Local community organisations promote the resources of an area, enabling residents to find the services they need.</li> </ul>

## Who are we?

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

- > neighbourhood centres
- > youth centres
- > refuges (youth, women's, family)
- > family support services
- > home based/community services to frail aged
- > migrant resource centres and direct ethnic and refugee support services
- > Aboriginal locally based services
- > community arts organisations
- > information and resource services
- > community children's services
- > community legal services
- > employment and training support services
- > community based childcare centres: long day care and occasional care
- > community based women's health centres;
- > services for people with a disability
- > out of school hours care services
- > 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 programs at local, state and federal level.

## What is valuable about small local community managed human service organisations?

*“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. (Odd Socks, Onyx & Williams 2002 LCSA)”*

- 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, peace, 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 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.

## What do we mean by ‘small organisations’?

In general we are talking about community organisations that might range in size from 3 to 20 employees, managed by local community members.

We don't want to get caught up in prescriptive descriptions of what size a small local community organisation should be to be part of Voice for SONG.

We could say that an organisation with only 2 employees is too small to be sustainable but Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre pioneered the No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) in neighbourhood centres across NSW as well as operating local services. It has an annual budget of less than \$80,000 and only 1.5 employees.

We could say that over 20 employees with multiple outlets is getting to be too big but look at the great work of SPYNS in Penrith which has a plethora of staff and community centres operating under its auspice and has still remained embedded in the local area. Cabramatta Community Centre has almost 100 staff and is very much driven by locally identified needs, managed by local people.

We are not proposing that all small organisations and all local groups are by nature effective, responsive, producing results for their local communities, or working well for staff. There may be local agencies that are not serving disadvantaged residents well and funding bodies should be critical in assessing value for money for tax payers dollars.

This paper is proposing that there are attributes of local resident managed small organisations that enable them to be particularly effective in community building. Local management enables responsiveness to local issues and opportunities and positions agencies well to build collaborations within local networks. It enables support for voluntary activism and community and project development that adds value on multiple levels.

## Characteristics of small local community managed human service organisations

- Geographically we are diverse: from suburban, rural, local, to regional and some statewide areas.
- We range in size: some have incomes as small as under \$50,000pa; some receive up to one million dollars. Some have a sole worker, while others have between twenty and thirty workers.
- We are community managed by democratically elected management committees. Most are incorporated associations. Their committees are diverse - made up of local residents, parents, business professionals, retirees, and community activists - people interested in their community.
- We have membership and volunteers, and participation is encouraged through committee and volunteer work.
- We have multiple partnerships and funding accountabilities: most income comes from government funding and most projects from several funding bodies. We have legislative accountability and corporate accountability in multiple forms and meet all legislative requirements.
- We cover a diversity of client groups, often the most disadvantaged and marginalised in the community.
- We have a strengths-focused, community development and social justice emphasis: commitment to fairness, responding to existing and emerging needs and participation and empowerment are part of the essential ways of working within this sector.

“Australians Living on the Edge” survey (2003) of the community sector in NSW - organisations with incomes under \$1 million represented 87% of the total. Government funding represented 76.6% of their total incomes.

## What we do

As small local 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 geographic location 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;
- Community development, management, direction setting, local needs based assessment, direct delivery of a range of services to particular client groups;
- Responsiveness to emerging needs with minimal layers of decision making;
- Developing and using capacity to be creative and innovative;
- Focus on the asset base of the local community rather than purely on needs;
- Cooperative networking with each other - including inter-agency collaboration;
- 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 communities;
- 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.

# Opportunities for small local organisations

## Opportunities in a changing society:

- There is an increasing focus on democracy and participation in our society
- There is increasing interest in meaningful work that contributes to the welfare of others, particularly amongst some young people. Small organisations offer the opportunity to get involved, in paid or unpaid capacity, in grass roots activism, advocacy and service development.
- Climate Change and the consciousness of limited resources will encourage individuals and communities to be looking closer to home for their basic needs. It offers unprecedented opportunities for local groups to develop and engage in community environmental projects such as fruit tree planting, community gardens, bulk solar panel purchase and school kitchen gardens.
- While globalisation is part of our everyday lives there is increasing interest in local grassroots community connections. People are inundated with information about all parts of the world and often overwhelmed - the links with local community can be the place where connections and participation become consolidated.
- The destabilisation of many large companies will bring a greater appreciation of local not for profit services- the collapse of ABC Childcare and CFK Childcare has demonstrated the value of local services managed by local parents that are embedded in communities. Community based childcare centres are not for profit but run by and for parents for the mutual benefit of children, families, the local economy and the community. Their reliability is proven and engenders social capital and loyalty.
- There are many new communication opportunities for local community groups and grass roots activism - websites, blogs, Facebook, community radio, Community TV (Channel 31) - a great number of ways for communities to promote themselves and use the skills of volunteers in their neighbourhood enthusiastic to make a difference.

## Opportunities for the Sector:

- Locally delivered services will become more cost effective and government funding may become more targeted towards local to save on transport costs and travel time;
- The CARE Campaign aims to bring improved wages and conditions. It is a well constructed campaign that is bringing workers together, gaining the support of the larger employers in the sector and appealing to the sense of fairness of politicians; government bureaucrats and the community to support better working conditions.
- Research on our value is growing; Universities are increasingly willing to engage with us to look at the impact of our work. The Centre for Social impact, a joint venture of three Universities, has been set up to increase social entrepreneurship and to promote the value of not for profits.

## New Ways of Working together:

- Consortiums made up of a range of small local organisations have had success in attracting tenders and brokerage funds. These have developed formal Memorandums of Understanding between agencies and have enabled local services to demonstrate their capacity to integrate their work. Examples of this are in the Northern Rivers Neighbourhood Centres and the Blue Mountains Early Intervention consortiums. Consortiums have also been formed around shared premises, shared administration and bulk buying, such as are developing in Bankstown and Campbelltown.
- The focus on results in Results Based Accountability (RBA) can mean we work more strategically (and less hard) by planning together with other organisations, focusing on the things we know work in our particular communities.
- Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is one of many new and wonderful approaches to supporting communities and there are many good trainers to assist services to implement these strategies.
- Building the evidence base - local agencies can be part of the documentation of the evidence of what works in their local community.

# Moving Forward - We want your stories!

Voice for SONG wants to spread the stories of the great work of small local community organisations.

We want to document stories about

- The innovative approaches small organisations have taken to social justice issues eg the work of some agencies on mental health community cultural development
- Stories of integrated work with families that have changed the circumstances and saved millions in future taxes by keeping people out of the criminal justice system
- Stories of working with particular disadvantaged groups
- Area Assistance Scheme success stories - there are many wonderful fixed term projects that have been successful in engaging communities eg *Koori Kids*

The stories need only be a page long.

They are important because they can provide

- Examples for other agencies on great ways of working.
- Evidence for reviews such as the *Inquiry into Child Protection*, the *CSGP Reform* and the campaign to ensure the survival of the Area Assistance Scheme.
- A rich history of effective projects, approaches and models.

Voice for SONG will be collecting stories in a number of ways over the next year. Please contact us at [wscf@wscf.org.au](mailto:wscf@wscf.org.au)

The VFS blog link is <http://voiceforsong.blogspot.com/>

## Voice for SONG (Small organisations non-government)

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. Voice for SONG formed to develop and maintain structures and activities that support and promote values of social justice, environmental sustainability, social capital, shared power and leadership, and not-for-profit activities. In challenging narrow notions of “efficiency” and promoting the value of small community organisations, Voice for SONG aims to bring about attitudinal and cultural change.

Voice for SONG continues 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 often values large organisations over small organisations
- 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.
- being a catalyst that influences others - and supporting the efforts of others to take leadership in progressing issues for small community organisations.

# Resources

## **Voice for SONG [www.voiceforsong.com](http://www.voiceforsong.com)**

The website has links to many resources including the SONG publication

*The Way Forward: Tackling the issues confronting small community organisations and the Small non-Government Organisations Working Together) Tips and Tools* (also known as the SNOW Report)- a concise resource to support the survival of small organisations.

## **Local Community Services Association [www.lcsa.org.au](http://www.lcsa.org.au)**

LCSA is the peak body for neighbourhood Centres in NSW and supports small organisations governance and programs. It published "*Odd Socks - why the survival of small community organisations is critical*" (Onyx & Williams) in 2003 to record some of the innovative work of neighbourhood centres in NSW.

## **NCOSS - Management Support Unit [www.ncoss.org.au](http://www.ncoss.org.au)**

Download lots of management resources including

*'Surviving the Squeeze - How small NGOs can thrive in the current climate'*.

## **OurCommunity [www.ourcommunity.com.au](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au)**

Building stronger communities through stronger community organisations - this social enterprise runs a informative website, monthly newsletter, grants schedule, and many other resources. The *Communities in Control* bi-annual Conference is the biggest gathering of community sector workers, volunteers and supporters - each bringing together a stellar list of speakers and around 1500 delegates to listen, debate, network, exchange tips and strategies, and recharge.

## **Centre for Social Impact [www.csi.com.au](http://www.csi.com.au)**

A new national initiative based at University of NSW to promote social initiatives and particularly the work of non profit organisations.

## **CommunityNet [www.tricomm.org.au/communitynet](http://www.tricomm.org.au/communitynet)**

Project of TRI Community Exchange providing weekly events, information and resources to the community sector though website and e-newsletters.

## **Western Sydney Community Forum [www.wscf.org.au](http://www.wscf.org.au)**

WSCF is the peak organisation for Western Sydney community groups providing advocacy on social policy and support with training, governance and collaborations.

VOICE FOR  
SONG

