



NCOSS Conference Paper

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Clamping Down? Restrictions from funders
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“All I have is a voice to undo the lie” W.H. Auden

About ACOSS

ACOSS is the national voice of people affected by poverty and inequality and the peak council of the community services and welfare sector. It has three main aims:

- advancing social justice
- a strong community sector
- a well governed and resourced organisation.

ACOSS's main modus operandi is policy analysis, research, review, public education and advocacy. Effective advocacy that contributes to policy reform is the end game.

The context in which ACOSS advocacy takes place

ACOSS work is undertaken in the face of a number of realities:

- more than 2.4 million Australians live below the poverty line.
- around 58% of people in poverty rely on government benefits¹. The level of income support for a single person is around \$180.00 per week - around 30% below the poverty line.
- the rich are becoming richer, the poor are becoming more numerous and the gap between the rich and poor is widening. In 2000, the bottom 20% of households received 3.8% of the total gross incomes of all households, and the poorest 10 % owned no assets, a net debt of \$1000 and only \$1000 in super.

¹ NATSEM, *The persistence of financial poverty in a decade*, 2001

2. Affordable Housing National Research Consortium, 2002

- around 380,000 people in receipt of unemployment benefits have been out of work for over twelve months, the majority of these have been out of work for over 2 and a half years.
- almost 90,000 low income Australians in the private rental market are paying more than 50% of their income in rent. In 2001 the poorest 40% of families and households could not afford to buy a three bedroom house anywhere in Adelaide, Melbourne or Sydney². At the same time there was a 30% decline in Government investment in public and community housing over the ten years to 2001.
- the number of homeless people is growing. According to the last census over 100,000 people are homeless. 90,000 people used crisis accommodation in 2001, and more than 4000 could not find shelter each fortnight.
- mental illness now affects almost 20% of the population, there has been a 400% increase in the rate of suicide among schizophrenia sufferers in the past forty years, depression is predicted to be the second leading cause of disability by 2020.
- an ACOSS survey of 800 community agencies showed that they helped at least 2.4 million Australians in 2002, but had to turn away around 200,000 people in need.
- there is increasing evidence that poverty is focused in certain geographical locations. These tend to be on the urban fringe, in large housing estates, and regional and remote areas. Economic re-structuring in industries that traditionally accessed semi-skilled and unskilled labour has contributed to this.

- Indigenous communities experience extreme disadvantage, with:
 - ❖ infant mortality three times as high as the national average
 - ❖ life expectancy approximately 20 years less than other Australians
 - ❖ up to five times the national unemployment rate
 - ❖ chronically high levels of diseases such as glaucoma, glue ear, diabetes, heart disease, respiratory conditions, and renal failure
 - ❖ low levels of preschool attendance (over half Indigenous children don't attend)
 - ❖ poor school completion rates.

Australia also ranks third highest of the 17 OECD countries of households with children living in poverty:

- 750,000 children (15%) live in poverty (using Henderson Poverty Line measure)
- 63% of these are in families relying on Government benefits
- 23% of children in sole parent families are in poverty
- 860,000 children are growing up in jobless families.

These facts mean that significant sections of the Australian community continue to be excluded from enjoying the benefits of our development as a nation and are unable to look with hope towards their own or their children's future.

It isn't just about poverty-inequality counts

Income inequality also increased between the late 80s and mid 90s, and there is strong evidence to suggest that it has been rising since then.

The increase was driven by a decline in income shares of the bottom 10 % and middle 20% during the 90s, and an increase in the share of the top 10%³.

³ NATSEM—Trends in Income and Consumption Inequality in Australia 2002

The wealthiest 20% has 55% of the nation's wealth, and the bottom 40% has less than eight percent⁴.

The polarisation of the Australian community in this way leads to a lack of shared experience, connection and understanding that makes it much easier to dismiss or ignore the experience of poverty by others, and to blame individuals rather than systemic policy failure.

Changing relationships and roles of the government and non-government sector

The entrenchment of poverty and inequality has come at a time in Australian society when managerialism has come to dominate the nature of government/non-government relationships as more and more services are 'outsourced'. In parallel the community sector has been increasingly exposed to 'market' like conditions in the form of competition and contestability and partnerships with governments are generally expressed in contractual terms.

Biting the hand that feeds you?

This has led to a greater inclination by governments to control and command the activities of organisations, including the nature, level and veracity of any advocacy work. The funding relationship is often crucial to an organisation's survival and so compliance with the conditions imposed on them is more likely than not.

ACOSS is in no less a precarious situation than many other organisations caught in this dilemma. The Government, however, is not a majority shareholder in ACOSS business, and this does help to fend off - to some extent - the hand of control.

However, fundamental tensions remain, despite the fact that the funding contribution is not for 'service delivery' but to support our work as a peak body (in our research, consultation, policy development, capacity building and advocacy roles). These tensions are primarily borne out in the contractual relationship, including requirements to provide early warning of any public advocacy or criticism, and in efforts to funnel our work into 'projects' that are in concordance with government policy directions. In addition, access

⁴ Financial Planning Association research 2002

to additional resources to participate in unforeseen consultations and project work with or on behalf of government is increasingly scarce and serves to constrain our capacity.

The difference in expectations and power relations also puts itself in policy dialogue with bureaucrats and politicians, especially when organisations like ours take a different and critical view from that of the government of the day. Although not always specifically stated, the Sword of Damocles is ever present.

Current tensions/issues in the policy and program environment

There are also a number of tensions within the current program and policy environment that impact on advocacy capacity. In summary, there generally exists:

- uneven power relations in contractual relations
- limited alternative avenues for advocacy and strategic dialogue with governments
- the twin agendas, often conflicting agendas, of: accountability, outsourcing and competition on the one hand; and community development and capacity building on the other
- limits and capacities of the skill base of the sector (especially in balancing advocacy against the management and accountability roles)
- a range of viability problems that take up time and resources
- the impact of policies like breaching that add to the level of demand, especially at the crisis end
- a focus on the individual and local, rather than the structural/systemic, which can lead to a patchy short term and unsustainable responses.

In this environment it is reasonable to suggest that effective advocacy becomes even more important. Such narrow and restrictive relationships with government are ultimately counterproductive as they tend to result in less innovation, flexibility, and cooperation between service providers, and limit input to strategic policy development at the structural level.

In this environment then it is important that our advocacy efforts includes the support of advocacy itself and for the benefits it will yield for the community as a whole.

The federal Government's response to the findings of the Charity Definitions Inquiry provides one such opportunity. Disturbingly, and in contravention of the Inquiry's recommendations, the Government is proposing a definition of charity that excludes organisations with 'a dominant purpose of changing government policy'. At first reading, this would appear to be a deliberately provocative attack on the advocacy capacity of the non-government sector.

When is advocacy most effective?

According to the ABS \$12.6 billion was expended on community services last year, there are at least 9,300 employing agencies, and around 6,000 of these are not for profits. There were also 341,447 employees working for community services organisations and 299,413 volunteers.

Services and community groups are often at the sharp end of disadvantage and in this respect they have a critical role in advising government what is happening on the ground, including the impact of policies and programs. They also have a role in monitoring and policy development. In the end it is this knowledge, capacity and connection that is most valuable in the advocacy role and what will bring greatest influence to bear on the community and on government. When the sector brings this knowledge together and presents cogent arguments for reform that go to the structural causes of disadvantage it is most effective in achieving change. To do this it needs to build and support platforms for strategic dialogue at all levels. The size and significance of the sector helps to legitimise the arguments for this in the eyes of the public and of government.

Today's policy makers are faced with a number of pressures which impact on their capacity and flexibility to respond to advocacy efforts:

- They are generally program and budget bound for specific periods of time, and must account accordingly through the bureaucracy, to parliament and to the public;
- They must serve the interests of the government of the day and must ultimately be directed by them, despite what they might think personally; and
- They are bound by the budgetary, legislative, parliamentary and reporting timetables.

And Ministers, it should be noted, have to pitch their portfolio claims against those of their colleagues. They will never get all they wish for.

From the policy makers point of view they will therefore look for proposals that are based on well developed arguments that can be matched with government directions; that have the capacity to demonstrate change and impact; and that are evidence based and solution oriented.

Of course with advocacy, it is very much a case of horses for courses. There is no one way to approach the task. Choices must be constantly made between whether at a particular juncture it is best to work inside the tent, mount public campaigns, aggressively use the media, form alliances and so on. Using a variety of approaches to skin the advocacy cat also helps to diffuse the capacity to control and command an agency's operations.

Conclusion: the ongoing importance of advocacy

Advocacy per se, then, becomes more difficult to sustain in a highly contractual environment. Partly this is due to the multiple relationships, partnerships and funding arrangements which exist between government and the community. This multiplicity of marriages are each characterized differently and around different sets of expectations and rules. Each party has other relationships which are characterised by yet other sets of expectations and rules. If these multiple relationships are not acknowledged and respected, any assumed controls set up through one arrangement can appear to be undermined by another.

At a policy level there has also been a shift from the perception of legitimate collective action and advocacy – to a focus on the stand-alone individual, frequently conceptualised as independent of the community around them. In this climate individuals are easier to blame for the circumstances that they may find themselves in – such as losing a job and not being able to find another one. In a related way, the shift away from broad-scale consultation with those affected by policies and programs to more limited approaches often targeting unrepresentative service agencies for their input is problematic.

However, while governments may seek to control what advocacy and other work agencies do by virtue of its funding relationships, it is ultimately not in their interests to do so. The very nature of the new 'managerialism' confines and constrains both governments and its funding partners in ways that limit democratic participation and potentially diminish social capital. Once relationships have matured, trust has been built and basic accountability issues are better understood by both parties, it should be possible and desirable to move beyond this into the territory of 'partnership' based on mutual respect and interest. This necessarily involves accepting a difference in identity, roles and responsibilities, and where the role of strategic advocacy is valued and utilised. Trust itself is made up of a number of elements including - mutual understanding; respect; recognising reputation; the expectation of exchange and shared values. All of these issues need to be addressed in order to develop and maintain trust between each other, with government and with other parts of the community.

It is the ongoing process of **participative** democracy, underpinned by strong advocacy, that allows issues for the least well off and the least powerful to emerge and be addressed. Advocacy is essential to not allowing what Disraeli described as *two nations – between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy* - to become an irreversible part of the social landscape. Advocacy then is at the heart of the democratic process. This is much more than a day at the polls every few years when only a minimal range of policy debates are in the spotlight and when the voices of the most disadvantaged are crowded out by the many and powerful interest groups who can effect electoral outcomes.

It is true that advocacy in many areas that impact on low income and disadvantaged Australians may conflict with Government aims or at least contribute to a Government's discomfort. At these times advocacy can sometimes be characterised as the **bells of dissent** as Senator Vanstone has often referred to. But from the ACOSS perspective – our work is much less about dissent and much more about ringing in the reality of the experience of disadvantage that is regrettably part of the lives of far too many people in our society.

ACOSS advocacy priorities

Deep divisions in society tear away at the social fabric, lessen the capacity for compassion and dialogue, and break the spirit of the individuals who consistently miss out.

The complex picture of poverty and disadvantage means that there are multiple strategies needed to reduce it.

Adequate income is crucial, but there are other services, supports and interventions that will reduce poverty. It is all about creating an environment where structural change, prevention and inclusion are the highest priorities.

In the current context some of the national priority areas that ACOSS is seeking to specifically address include:

- *improving job prospects for unemployed Australians*
- *addressing the adequacy of social security benefits and allowances*
- *prevention and capacity building strategies for at risk groups and communities, including the extension of universal services.*
- *boosting essential physical and social supports in areas such as transport, education, health, affordable housing and community services*
- *fixing the punitive and counter productive breaching and penalty regime.*

In the face of such uncertain and fast changing times an agenda that seeks to seriously tackle poverty and works to build an Australia which is truly inclusive must be the priority for our governments and ourselves.

Any successes in reducing poverty and inequality have been due to targeted political policy and action, underpinned by community concern and strong advocacy about the unacceptable conditions faced by particular individuals and groups.

The important thing is that we can not afford, as individuals or as professionals to ignore issues of disadvantage and inequality - funding restrictions or not - and we must find ways to continue to strengthen and support the role of advocacy in order to bring change about.