



Negotiating Relationships-

New research on Compacts

Background

The New South Wales community services NGO sector is not alone in developing a compact with government¹. In recent years compacts or 'written agreements' between governments and non-government sectors have been implemented in several countries.

This trend commenced in the mid 1990s when a report commissioned by the English NGO peak, the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (previously the National Council for Social Service), recommended a formal agreement between government and the community/voluntary sector. The concept of a compact was embraced by the newly elected Blair government in 1997 and the English compact was launched in 1998.

A recent paper by John Casey "*Advocacy in the Age of Compacts: Regulating Government-Community Sector Relations- International Experience.*"² provides a detailed summary of the development of compacts and their impacts within an historical and international context. Casey's paper also documents some of the major lessons from a decade of the development, implementation and evaluation of such agreements.

This paper is an outcome of a research partnership between the University of Technology, Sydney, the University of Queensland, NCOSS and the Public Interest Research Centre (PIAC). Funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant, the project is concerned with the impact of compacts between government and non government sectors, with a particular focus on the impact on the advocacy roles of the NGO sector.

¹ *The Working Together for NSW* agreement between the NSW Government and the NSW NGO sector was signed in 2006

² The research for this article was been funded by Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grant: LP0667785: *Advocacy in the age of compacts: Strengthening the policy development dimension of partnership agreements between government and community organisations*. The ARC grant was awarded to a research team from two universities (University of Technology, Sydney and University of Queensland) and two industry partners (NCOSS - New South Wales Council of Social Services and PIAC (Public Interest Advocacy Centre)).

Compact experience -post 1998.

Casey examines the history of compact development in a number of countries, notably England and Canada, but also New Zealand, France and Croatia. Within this range, the English compact is clearly the best resourced; implementation was overseen by a group of Ministers and chaired by the Home Office Minister, a Commissioner for the Compact was appointed and a non-government Commission on the Compact was established in 2007 to strengthen the implementation of the Compact. It is also noteworthy that apart from these compact specific roles and commissions, the English government includes a Minister for the Third Sector and an Office of the Third Sector within the Cabinet Office.

The implementation of the English compact has not been 'smooth sailing' but according to Casey's paper, it remains the 'benchmark' for other jurisdictions; it is 'not simply a series of documents but a continuing process backed by a considerable infrastructure.'³

The history of the compact in Canada, known as the Accord, provides an instructive contrast and the key reasons cited for the less successful implementation of the Canadian model contain valuable advice regarding compact implementation process.

Lessons and future initiatives

According to the paper and not surprisingly, the two primary areas compacts seek to address are the stability of the funding process and the recognition of the sectors independence. These two requirements form a central challenge for NGO sectors internationally; how to remain fully accountable for service contracts with government *and* retain our organisational and sectorial independence. Clarity regarding this demarcation is both essential and achievable; however it remains a key partnership concern of compacts.

The report also includes a useful set of guidelines for the preparation of compacts. These guidelines summarise the lessons learnt from previous compact processes and cover areas such as initiation, participation, partnership and funding.

In summary, the research suggests the major reasons for lack of success with compact processes include:

- A 'top down' attempt at development which lacks NGO sector-wide representation.
- The grafting of compact process onto political/ social frameworks that are not ready to support it.

³ J Casey (2007). *Advocacy in the age of compacts: Strengthening the policy development dimension of partnership agreements between government and community organisations*. ARC Linkage Grant LP0667785 (Working document) p:13

- A lack of government and sector champions to drive the process
- Changes in personnel or the government itself.
- Lack of resources to fully implement the compacts commitments
- Failure to address the primary issues of funding and the independence of the sector.

While acknowledging the deficiencies of many compacts processes, the paper concludes that compacts do support the advocacy role of the sector and can have considerably impact on relationships between government and the sector.

However the paper also notes that three broad scenarios have emerged during the post-1998 implementation of compacts;

Compacts have either.....

- supported the development of stronger partnerships between governments and the sectors,
- enabled governments to exercise greater control over the sector or
- remained rhetorical documents with little impact on relationships.

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