*Productivity Commission Submission*
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*Comments are invited on the Commission's proposed approach of adopting a broad view of the sector for the purposes of assessing its contribution and narrowing the study's focus to consider the specific policy and capacity issues raised in the terms of reference.*

Comment: Commission's proposed approach is appropriate. While the government's focus is necessarily on issues of efficiency and effectiveness of funded service providers, a focus on that alone will grossly underestimate the contribution made by the sector to the well being of the wider Australian community. Therefore some attention needs to be place on the measurement of the broader contribution of the sector. Of particular importance is a greater awareness of the contribution of the formation of networks, sometimes between individuals and sometimes between organizations. We know relatively little about how these operate in providing broad communication channels and support within civil society, initiating new social movements, or raising issues of concern in the community. I attach a recent conference paper (SPRC 2009) which begins to explore some of these aspects (attachment A)

Nonprofit social service organisations make a contribution to the community well beyond the efficiency and effectiveness of the specific services they provide. Their existence, profile and community citizenship activities such as speaking engagements, raises awareness of social issues that many in the community would not encounter. This is important in developing a culture of philanthropic giving both at a corporate and individual level. It is also important in creating a sense of connectedness and responsibility between all members of the community.

Many of the services that nonprofit community service organisations provide have an educative and attitude changing effect beyond the immediate activity in which they are engaged. An example of this is employment placement and support services for people with a disability. Apart from the direct benefits to the worker with a disability, done well, it has been demonstrated that direct contact with a person with a disability in a regular setting where that person is on equal terms with other workers is a powerful attitude changing experience for nondisabled people (Antonak, 1981; Elmaleh, 2000; Gelber, 1993; Hewstone, 2003; Wai Au & Man David, 2006). A manager introduced to workplace adjustments through an employment support agency may make work place adjustments as a matter of course from then on not needing an agency there after. The experience of a colleague with mobility impairment may ensure that physical access is always on the agenda whether it is required at the time or not. There is a ripple effect of such attitude changes that creates a more inclusive community offering greater opportunities for acceptance and participation.

Antonak, R.F. (1981) Prediction of attitudes towards disabled persons: a multivariate analysis. **Journal General Psychology** 789-884
Elmaleh, G.Y. (2000) **A study of attitudes toward employees with disabilities** Ann Arbor: UMI
Gelber, D.M. (1993) **Changing attitudes toward physically disabled persons: effect of contact knowledge of disability and information exchange** Ann Arbor: UMI
Hewstone, M. (2003) Inter-group contact: Panacea for prejudice? **The Psychologist**, 12 (7), 352-355
Wai Au, King., Man David, W.K. (2006) Attitudes toward people with disabilities: a comparison between health care professionals and students **International Journal of Rehabilitation Research** 29:155 -160

*Do you agree that a conceptual framework is important? Do you have any suggestions on the key elements of the framework? Are there any specific issues in measuring the contribution of Australian based international development and aid organisations?*

Comment: this is a useful conceptual framework. However there are two additional output/ outcome category to consider. The first is **the development of innovative solutions to social problems**. History tells us that most services that we take for granted (even hospitals and schools) began as community lead innovations. Not all are successful, but the possibility needs to be nurtured. The second is the awareness raising and educative/attitude changing outcomes identified above.

*Comments are invited on approaches taken by not for profit organisations in forming partnerships with businesses for improving access to human resources and organisational capabilities and also on any impediments experienced. How might any such impediments might be resolved?*

Comment: An extensive study conducted by Jenny Green into the management of nonprofit community service organisations found that the promotion of partnerships with for-profit businesses as a means of improving access to human resources and organisational capabilities sent a strong message to the sector that for-profit business is better at this and that their models are appropriate and desirable. In fact this message is not only inaccurate but it is also damaging to the capacity building of sector specific organisational capabilities. The fundamental difference between an organisational that's core purpose is to make a profit and an organisation that's core purpose is a social service underscores all management activities. It is not possible to impose a for-profit model directly onto a nonprofit organisation without major adjustments. It needs to be recognised that nonprofit management is different and that there is considerable evidence of skilled efficient and effective nonprofit management operating in the sector currently. Furthermore there needs to be considerable investment in nonprofit management capacity building through funds for sector specific training and education as well as funding for partnerships between highly successful nonprofits and nonprofits with management needs for the purpose of improving access to human resources and organisational capabilities. The myth that business does it better needs to be 'busted' and the successes of nonprofits need to be promoted within the sector and to the community widely. Findings of the management study quoted above are available on request from jenny.green@uts.edu.au

*Comments are invited on what factors are impeding the spread of knowledge among Australian not for profit organisations regarding how well they deliver their outcomes and key drivers of their efficiency and effectiveness in doing so. Similarly, the Commission invites comment on what factors facilitate the spread of such knowledge and how these might be enhanced.*

Comment: There is little or no effort put into promoting nonprofit successes. Funding mentoring between organisations would assist. It is a more difficult prospect since a competitive climate has been fostered in the sector over the past 14 years. Funding for travel to sector specific management courses such as the Master of Management Community Management at UTS would enable regional and remote organisations to send staff. This would have the immediate dual benefit of increase knowledge and sector networks.

*Comments are invited on the incentives (such as community attitudes and views of donors) on not for profit organisations to operate efficiently and effectively and to take innovative approaches. To what extent do these incentives differ as a result of the funding arrangements faced by an organisation? Are the incentives currently faced by not for profit organisations sufficient to ensure they operate in an efficient and effective manner and, if not, what changes are needed to increase those incentives? Are there constraints on innovation, and if so what can be done to remove them?*

Comment: Outputs based funding contracts limit innovation in organisations that do not have an existing resource base. A government grant system that seed funded innovation would address this problem to a degree. The 'demonstration funding projects' in disability services in the 1980s are an example of this. It set in motion at the time innovative programs that offered completely different models of service delivery.

*To what extent are government agencies moving to 'lead provider' relationships —to the potential exclusion of smaller not for profit organisations — and is this compromising diversity of not for profit organisations and the effectiveness of their operations? What options might lessen the potential loss of provider diversity that such a trend might otherwise cause?*

Comment: There is growing evidence that funders prefer fewer, larger non-profits with which to do business, and these larger non-profits are becoming increasingly "like" the departments which fund them in structure and processes, an example of institutional isomorphism. Several consequences follow, some of which are unintended:

1.  Smaller organizations are crowded out. These smaller organizations tend to be local, innovative, highly responsive to local conditions. They lack management sophistication, but nonetheless may be highly effective in pursuing their objectives. However, they are, by definition, diverse. One size does not fit all.
2.  Large organizations may subcontract to smaller ones. This may lead to the same kind of over-governance, and forced compliance to a single model that occurs in the sector as a whole in relation to the funding department.
3.  More significantly, the development of social capital, and broad community engagement and cohesion, rests on the participation of as many citizens as possible. This is very difficult within a large centralized bureaucracy, whether such a bureaucracy is a government one or a large charity. The larger, more centralized the organization, and the greater the number of hierarchical levels, the LESS likely that there will be broad community engagement, and the less community capacity is developed.

It is therefore recommended that the commission examine the possibility of multiple models of funding, including provision for both large and small organizations to be involved. Some portion of total funding within a given program could be earmarked for small organization provision, perhaps with some sort of management support from a peak body.

*Comments are invited on how the environment within which not for profit organisations operate might be changed to enhance the advocacy role of not for profit organisations.*

Comment: I refer you to our recent empirical paper on advocacy which has been published in Australian Journal of social Issues. That article directly addresses this question: Onyx, J., Dalton, B., R. Melville and Casey, J. and Banks, R.(2008)  Implications of government funding of advocacy for third-sector independence and exploration of alternative advocacy funding models*", Australian Journal of Social Issues.* December/Summer Vol.43 (4), P631-648.

# Different Types of Community Networks

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**Abstract**


Networks appear to be the basic ingredient of all community action. But what kind of networks, how formalized, for what purpose, and what specific impact are questions about which there is little understanding in either theory or practice.


This paper explores three civil-society networks in Australia, which differ in structure, decision-making, and sharing. The research involved interviews of key informants in several organisations from each network.


The first is a network with a "head office". After establishment of "Job Network", employment-service contracts were awarded to external agencies, and these agencies organised themselves into networks to jointly bid for contracts. These networks with formal structures proved difficult to manage.


The second network is the Aged Care Alliance, which operates in a traditional civil- society manner, with community organisations collaborating to mount a particular campaign, usually under the aegis of a peak body. This network has mounted several very successful campaigns.


The third case describes a loose network, comprising a number of small, activist organisations operated mainly on-line and by young people.  This type of network, although essential for the survival of these organisations, has no formalized structure.


The three networks are treated as ideal types and are theorized, using complexity theory.

**Introduction**


Networks appear to be the basic ingredient of all community action. They form the basis of social capital formation (Productivity Commission, 2003) and the development of a socially inclusive society (Gillard, 2007)  But there still remain many questions about which there is little understanding in either theory or practice. In this paper, we explore three civil-society networks that operate in Australia. Each is very different in the way it is structured, the way decisions are made, and the means by which information and resources are shared.


The research questions we address are:

- what kinds of networks develop within Australian civil society and for what purpose and impact?
- what useful frameworks or models can we use to understand the different kinds of networks?
- how do the networks operate to generate new knowledge and bring about social change?
- what kinds of decision-making structures are emerging?


In the paper, we will first describe each of the case-study networks.


The first is a network with a "head office", so it is a semi-hierarchical organisation. When the government privatized employment services, contracts were awarded to nonprofit, for-profit and government-owned agencies. These agencies organised into such networks to jointly bid for contracts, replacing what formerly were informal collaborations between autonomous organisations.


The second network is the Aged Care Alliance which operates in a more traditional, civil society manner, in which community organisations may collaborate in order to mount a particular campaign, usually under the aegis of a peak body, in this case NCOSS, that acts as secretariat for the work of the members.


The third covers a loose network consisting of a number of small, activist organisations, operated mainly by young people and mainly on-line, based around a newly created Centre for Social Change. The network is essential for the survival of these organisations, but has no formalized structure.


In the final section of the paper, we present a theoretical analysis of community networks, drawing largely on concepts from complexity theory.

**Methodology**

We draw on the results of three separate case studies of community networks within Australia, which relate to how these networks develop, operate and bring about change. The studies all used semi-structured interviews, triangulated with secondary sources of information and some participant observation. For the purposes of this preliminary exploration of the data, the interview material was trawled for evidence of emergence, drawing on complexity theory, and in particular looking for information on how the network emerged, using what forms of communication and decision making, and how the networks were coordinated. Further details for each of the case studies are given below.

**ESC - A network providing services to "Job Network"**

Employment Services Corp (ESC), a pseudonym, is an Australia-wide network of organisations linked together via contractual arrangements to jointly bid for employment-services contracts. This network was originally a loose collection of independent providers, who decided that they needed to work together in order to have the skills for submitting bids to tenders, writing grant applications and properly comply to the requirements set by the funding body. The Head Office organises the bids, administers the contracts and conducts other related activities, while the organisations provide the services at local offices. ESC's culture acknowledges that there is much diversity, that local offices and the communities they serve are quite different. In addition, because these offices are generally part of a parent organisation (a charitable, religious, local council or for-profit), they are influenced by philosophies and procedures of that organisation. ESC was established about 10 years ago, and specializes in assisting the most disadvantaged in the community.

**Decision-making.** In ESC's case, this topic might more accurately be entitled "who is in control here?" The manager and staff at each local office experience three levels of accountability: 1) to the government department that awards the contracts, sets the rules, and collects data to measure their performance on the contracts, 2) to ESC Head Office, and 3) to their parent organisation that provides their salaries and office resources. ESC also has a CEO and Board of Directors. This network within its governmental framework creates a very complex organisational context, which creates challenges for the managers at each level (Head Office, parent organisation and local office). An illustrative example is the computer system at ESC. The government department specifies the system that must be used at each local office, because staff must enter data about their clients into it. This data is then also used to measure that office's performance and thus influence decisions for the next round of contracts. Yet the computers on which this system runs are provided by the parent organisation, which sometimes results in under-resourcing of the computers and their maintenance. And training of staff in use of the system is largely left to Head Office.

**Communication.** ESC is a loosely-coupled organisation with limited organisation-wide communications infrastructure; parent organisations provide the telephone and email systems for their offices, as well as making hiring/firing decisions. This resulted in Head Office having little detailed information about the local offices and their staff. Recently Head Office created a website that operates as an intranet for the network and does provide a unifying force, as do the annual national conference and regular office-manager meetings which are organised by Head Office. However, staff at the offices feel unsupported and react to information provided to them by Head Office as directives. Communication in the other direction – back to Head Office - was limited.

**Tensions, dualities.** Managing the tensions arising from this form of collaboration is challenging (Brown and Keast, 2003; Thomson and Perry, 2006). Baker *et al*. (2009), using case studies of ESC and relevant literatures, identified five dualities central to understanding effective management in non-profit networks. One example is a duality related to values: compliance/service. That is, the conflict between the service orientation that existed prior to privatization of services and the new roles of managers and staff at employment offices. At ESC this conflict was experienced as between providing service to job-seekers and the community, on the one hand, and compliance to policies and procedures and meeting performance measures, as managed by the Head Office, on the other hand. The management difficulties being experienced in service-delivery networks such as ESC are being exacerbated by the interventionist role of the relevant government department.

## Aged Care Alliance (ACA)

Within civil society there are many ongoing networks that are semi-formalized. Many of these operate over time under the umbrella of a peak organisation. One of these is ACA, the second of our case study networks. This was formed in 1996/97 as a response to the Federal Government initiative to bring fees into nursing homes and hostels. Several people in the aged care sector, service deliverers, approached NCOSS to lead a campaign against this initiative. NCOSS was asked to play that role because it was not a direct service provider, and so could take greater risks in speaking out. After the campaign the group decided to continue to meet, and to broaden its remit to include issues of older people in general, not simply referring to institutional care. Members include industry representatives, consumer representatives, consumers and others involved in the progression of the interests of older people in New South Wales. They include the very large service-providing organisations such as Benevolent Society, but also small unfunded consumer bodies that rely entirely on volunteers. The group meets every two months at NCOSS which is a central location in Surry Hills. No organisation is funded to provide the work of ACA, and so each organisation contributes a nominal amount for the co-ordination work that is required.

**Decision Making: While NCOSS convenes ACA, it does not control it. Quite often the issues on the table are contentious, with different stake holders taking different perspectives. While all agree to a broad set of stated principles, there are different views, say between service providers and consumers. These differences are discussed at the bi-monthly meetings. A media release will go out only where there is broad agreement across all stake holders. Where such agreement cannot be reached, different groups may release their own statements. This happened with respect to nursing home standards, in which NCOSS then represented the consumer groups, independently of the service providers. But, for example, in developing the election documents that state the policies and the recommendations for the top 10 priorities for State Government and Commonwealth Government for older people, the work was distributed between working parties of ACA, following a general brainstorming discussion at the general meeting. NCOSS then took the role of editing the document to ensure consistency of expression. That document represented the consensus views of the whole membership. Sometimes one organisational member will take the lead on a particular issue, such as that mobilized by COTA (Council of the Ageing) with respect to the recent campaign to increase the pension, but with the support of the wider membership.**

**Communication: NCOSS** distributes the meeting agenda and minutes of meetings. It also distributes information via email to a large list of some 300 recipients.

> *I give out information and I receive information through that. If we're running a campaign it's a very quick way to get information out because most of the members on that email list are the leaders of their own networks. So it's like a tree…they decide what they send on to their own networks from the information I've sent them but it means they're not being precious with that information. It's sort of a true information flow*. (NCOSS informant).

The flow of information is also facilitated by written material published in various newsletters. However, face-to-face meetings are considered essential, particularly for those people who do not have easy access to the internet, but also to achieve a deeper level of discussion and consensus. These involve not only the ACA meetings, but a number of other meetings of relevant related networks (such as HACC) and the NCOSS regional forums.

**The Role of NCOSS:** NCOSS has a co-ordination role, and convenes the bi-monthly meetings. Because of its unique role as peak representative, and non-service provider, it is able to take risks that other organisations cannot, and therefore is able to act as spokesperson, sometimes for ACA as a whole, sometimes for some section such as unfunded consumer groups. For the same reason it is able to act as mediator in conflicts between stakeholders, ensuring that all sides get a fair hearing. Because of its role within civil society as Council of Social Services, it has a close relationship with government, and particularly with relevant NSW ministers. This enables NCOSS, on behalf of ACA, to provide information to and receive information from government, and to lobby Government on an issue.

**SMSA - a network of advocacy organisations**

The Internet has created new forms of networks within civil society that operate largely online, and are extensive, yet loosely defined. They operate independently of government, often in an advocacy role (Vegh, 2003). For this third case we examine a network of four organisations. The Sydney Mechanics School of Arts (SMSA) (http://www.sydneymsa.com.au/) is one of the oldest 'progressive' educational institutions in Australia. Located in central Sydney, it was recently renovated and re-branded as a 'centre for social change'. It rents out office space and function rooms, runs a program of conversations and seminars, and is thus able to provide resources for new organisations started by passionate people who believe change is achievable.

The other three organisations are connected through having shared physical spaces, friendship groups, management personnel and online connectivity. GetUp (http://www.getup.org.au/）is an "independent, grass-roots community advocacy organisation giving everyday Australians opportunities to get involved and hold politicians accountable on important issues". It has 300,000 members.

Project Australia  (http://www.projectaustralia.org.au/ ) emerged from its founder's driving energy:

*I found that even if they were working in the same sectors they weren't connected around issues that they were interested in themselves….. So I put out an email to some of my network and suggested that we hold a national night of discussions.  So in December 2006 about 100 people met in 13 groups around Australia.*

Vibewire  http://www.vibewire.net/www.vibewire.net/index.html  functions with a business incubator model, providing space and resources for other groups, such as Project Australia.

**Communication.**  These three organisations interact in both virtual and real spaces. GetUp is the largest, but the size of the smaller ones allows them to use the latest Web 2.0 technology, such as Facebook and Twitter, to enhance their networks. They all communicate with their own members via emails and newsletters. They also organise 'meetups' where members in similar locations meet to discuss issues, formulate campaigns or provide feedback to the central organising body. Each organisation has the challenge of keeping its members motivated and connected, and sustaining the organisation's activities. This is difficult for the smaller ones, as most workers are volunteers and sourcing adequate funding is a constant concern.

**Decision-making.** Their mode of decision-making is best described as 'fluid'. Decisions are often taken by a small group of key organisers, then disseminated for discussion. Decentralised decision making can also go in the other direction. GetUp regularly canvasses members' opinions on issues and then formulates strategies accordingly. Joint campaigns involving several organisations also illustrate the fluidity of these processes. Each group can name many other groups that are in their advocacy network. The success of these collaborations relies on common identities and shared goals. In campaigns, the workload is shared and each organisation works to their strengths, to make the event or vision happen. However, each member of the network remains autonomous.

**Role of SMSA**. SMSA nurtured this network by providing low-cost office facilities, and a collaborative community culture that helped to bind it together. Each of the three organisations initially had an office at SMSA, and each continues to contribute to events and seminars. Interconnections between the four are evidence of the multi-layered nature of the relationships. Connections are not necessarily premeditated, or initiated by one person; they are often organic, the catalyst being an event or individual that brings like-minded people or groups together. The collective identities that emerge (Melucci, 1995) help to sustain the network. Whether they occur in physical space or online, the interactions take place in spaces where people feel they are engaging with democratic processes very directly.

### Theoretical analysis of community networks

Complexity theory offers an insight into the fundamental issue of *emergence* (Chiles *et al.*, 2004). It offers an explanation for "how system-level order spontaneously arises from the action and repeated interaction of lower level system components without intervention by a central controller" (Chiles *et al.*, 2004, P 501). This theoretical approach can be applied to emergent self-organising networks within civil society.

Civil society is a good example of a complex system. We are dealing with multiple and overlapping complex systems which may be partly, but never totally, bounded by a geographical area such as a city. The systems are not only overlapping, but open, thus adding to the levels of complexity. Nonetheless they have meaning to their participants, and they are capable of generating remarkable outcomes.

Complexity theory suggests a number of crucial dynamics that may explain the process of the self-organising emergence of networks. They emerge out of states of disequilibrium, or a tension

between disequilibrium and equilibrium in the wider context. The early stages of emergence are likely to be marked by conflict, not only between the member agents and some wider social or political issue or event, but also between the member agents themselves. This was well illustrated in the case of ACA network and nursing home standards. It is through such turmoil that a new, creative milieu can emerge, one which seeks innovative solutions to perceived problems.

This state of disequilibrium draws agents together. As we saw with the third case, these agents may be individuals, or organisations or both.  These agents interact, discuss, and explore options for action. Many consequent actions are small and localized, involving the active initiative of concerned agents. Some of these actions will lead nowhere, but others appear promising, and are communicated to other participants in the embryonic network, which at this stage is little more than a fertile milieu for action. Others hear about the actions and discussions, through word of mouth and/or electronic technologies, and/or published papers and media reports. Someone, usually a group, calls a meeting, and the network begins to take shape as various agents share information and agree to further action.

Positive feedback loops are crucial in establishing new modes of operating. That is, it is essential that some actions lead to some sort of positive outcome, perhaps partial and temporary, but enough to motivate others. Such results must be communicated to others in the network.

The discussions and forms of action are volatile and full of uncertainty and potential conflict. However, while disequilibrium may be welcomed and further encouraged, there are also counter forces towards some sort of new equilibrium. Stability within the embryonic network is dependent on "deep structures" involving shared intrinsic values and operating principles of the participants. Normally these will be articulated in terms of a common set of principles or memorandum of understanding signed off by all participating agents, as we saw in the second case. Thus creative turbulence is contained within an agreed broad set of objectives that are shared.

Within the context of civil society, we are looking at the coalescing of relationships. This creates a fertile milieu out of which may emerge new ideas, formations, intentions for collaborative action. An emergency or perceived crisis of some sort may then be enough to trigger the rapid formation of a new organisational form, or collective action of some sort. There is an ongoing process from individual agency to creative milieu to emergent network structures and ultimately to formal adaptive organisational forms.

Within a successful network, decision making is shared and dispersed. There is no central controlling authority. Indeed the attempt to establish such a central "head office" created ongoing difficulties and tensions within the network described in case one. Nonetheless there is leadership. This

leadership may be one or several individual agents or a coordinating organisation. The leadership is emergent, just as actions of the network are emergent. The task of the leader(s) is to nurture and enable, not to command or control (Plowman *et al.*, 2007). As enablers, leaders disrupt existing patterns of behaviour, encourage novelty and make sense of emerging events for others. By assisting the sense-making process, they render meaning within the highly dynamic events and actions.

Some formally established networks are formed from a top down process, usually by a higher authority such as a government department. These are likely to approximate traditional organisational forms or contractual organisational alliances with semi-legal contractual obligations and determined outcomes, controlled from a central point, such as our case one. However, the vast majority of civil society networks are formed from below, emergent from the dynamic and creative turmoil which is driven by social disequilibrium and the search for new responses to current issues and problems. Not all networks will become fully fledged and recognized forms such as the Aged Care Alliance. All such emergent networks will go through a period of formation, much of which will be invisible to the outsider, and lack any coherent shape. Some on-line activist organisations such as identified in our third case study are at this point, and may well remain loose and mutually supportive networks of individual agents. Local resident groups may also fit this model. Such loose networks may remain dormant for some time, but have the potential to be activated into more formal networks in the event of an emergency, such as a bush fire, or the need for political action in defense of a threatened amenity. If and when that happens, they will evolve in much the same way as identified in our cases presented here.

While much more remains to be explored, it does appear that complexity theory provides a useful lens in the study of civil society networks. The implications, both for civil society itself and for social policy, are significant. In particular, it is likely that civil society action is not amenable to "top down" bureaucratic forms of decision making, but rather is constantly self generated from a myriad of lower order discussions and actions by individuals and smaller component groups, which coalesce as they merge together. To the extent to which this is so, public policy would do well to listen to the resultant collective voices, to work collaboratively with them, but avoid attempting to control them. As noted in the recommendations of the Australian Community Building National Network: " Empowerment and devolution are essential for community building - governments should enable community strengthening and social capital development, not control its form or dictate its direction".

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