

Speaking Notes Ara Cresswell
WACOSS Conference Perth May 2006

Acknowledgment of the ancestral custodians of the country – the Noongar people.

This presentation will highlight the crisis in the community sector, particularly in relation to wages and conditions, with a focus upon the ACT and a bit about how we are addressing this issue.

“As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be totally rich... As long as people are afflicted with debilitating disease I can never be totally healthy ... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.” Martin Luther King Jr., April 1959

It is not new to those of us who work in the community sector, that structural inequality demeans us all, leaves us all poorer, and leaves open questions about our humaneness. While ever there are people who are poor, people who are marginalised, people who do it tough, then our society can never be truly civilised.

Much of the strength of the community sector, represented here today by many of you, is that it fights inequality and works towards the creation of equity for all people. This sector is throwing its back into turning around the cycles of disadvantage and marginalisation, but is, sadly, groaning under the weight of sheer numbers of people who have fallen on hard times. How is it that we can keep this sector alive? How do we retain its vibrancy, its passion, its soul? This sector has existed as much on the goodwill and philosophical commitment of many of you in the room, as it has upon the funding allocated by various arms of government.

Is the community sector viable and what does this mean in the context of sustainability and what are we doing about it?

ACTCOSS remains concerned about the ongoing viability of the sector, particularly in relation to wages and conditions, and to this end have engaged in a long term campaign aimed at addressing the discrepancy between public and community sector wages. Our public sector counterparts receive far higher remuneration, enjoy far greater levels of resourcing, and have portability of conditions such as long service leave. (Chart 1) I so often see the best of our workforce being poached by the government and I am regularly left wondering if one day that old adage "pay peanuts, get monkeys" will come to fruition in this sector. It's true we have paid peanuts for a long time but we exist on the goodwill and commitment of the likes of you in this room. The loss of this sector would mean a multi billion dollar problem for governments down the track. Sensible then, to address working conditions now.

The reality is that one of the biggest longer-term threats to the viability of community sector organisations is the view that funding services and supports for people living in poverty and disadvantage is a drain on the economy. The Australian government and media focus upon "welfare dependency" feeds into the myth that that the community sector is leeching the resources from our revenue base.

Unless this view is addressed and overturned there will always be a struggle for resources, for legitimacy, for a secure place in the world for community service organisations.

I would argue that not only is this view of community services incorrect - it is unsustainable:

We've had a market system for a long time now, and it doesn't look like it will, on its own, be delivering equitable outcomes acceptable to basic standards of justice and compassion, anytime soon!

In contrast to this view we must make clear that social sustainability is one way of understanding social risk and disadvantage as something shared: one way of

saying that if some people are being ill-treated by the prevailing system, than that system itself is undermined. And if the system does not work for the most marginalised what does it perpetuate besides greed, division and long term inequity?

But as a project, does social sustainability and sector viability have teeth? That is, can it change the way resources are allocated, the way powerful players behave?

To have teeth, it must demonstrate to all the players - those who are least sympathetic as well as those who are most sympathetic - that on a fundamental level it is worth putting resources, attention, and emotional energy into making our society more equitable.

And because we all have different views of what makes it 'worth it' to do something, we have to engage with other people's frames of reference (for example, the view that if it doesn't make money it isn't worth doing). We must, also, at all times, measure our success against the most marginalised. If it doesn't work for those who are the most alienated then who is it for and what purpose does it serve?

Too often the needs of people who live in poverty and disadvantage are traded off against other imperatives, and resources devoted to assisting them are seen as a drain on the economy, on the productive lives of the rest of the community. Too often we bypass the person in need for a flawed economic argument that is not backed up by progressive social policies that allow wealth to be evenly distributed.

One of the pieces of work that we have undertaken was has been to counter this view with research into the economic contribution of community services. (copies of report).

We found that community services enable people living in disadvantage to increase their economic engagement and that spending on community services

promotes employment and economic growth more effectively than almost all other industry sectors.

We are still working to promote this understanding of the community sector, in the hope that it will encourage policy makers to consider the viability of the community sector as relevant to broader outcomes for the ACT economy and community.

In doing so, there are philosophical challenges and unresolved tensions. Does presenting community services in the context of economic value undermine the distinctively non-commercial nature of community services and strengthen the orthodox view that everything must be reduced to economic value? This is one view.

Another view is more pragmatic: that we must make whatever arguments are necessary to obtain the resources we need to do our essential work.

Still another view is perhaps more satisfying: by demonstrating the economic value of community services, and breaking down the false dichotomy between the economic and the social, we're expanding the concept of economic value to be a more sustainable one.

We have mounted a campaign that has been in operation for some years that involves arguments economic and social.

A brief outline:

2003 – Campaign resulted in changes to contracts, commitments to the review of funding models, and other peripheral benefits. (Present fact sheets)

2004 – Chief Minister made commitments at the ACTCOSS Conference and the Community Sector Taskforce was born.

2005 – Heart of the Community commenced to work side by side with the work of the Community Sector Taskforce. Close to 2,000 postcards were delivered to cabinet members. Rally held. Gov made a commitment to indexation model based on WA model but didn't fund it! It should show up in this year's budget.

2006 – Finalisation of report of Community Sector Taskforce which is currently with the Minister.

Major recommendations include;

- Workforce development. 31% staff turnover 2004 – Community Sector Survey. Training analysis and funding
- IR advice for the community sector
- Community sector OH&S project be developed.
- Long Service Leave. We concentrated on LSL – a mandatory portable LSL scheme. Nationally, portability of long service leave entitlements has been established in the building and construction, coalmining and stevedoring industries. The ACT and Queensland have also extended portability to the contract cleaning industry.
 - the high turnover of staff in the community sector affecting workers ability to accrue entitlements, such as long service leave, especially with much more contract work in our sector.
 - retention of staff in a single organisation for seven years is becoming increasingly difficult.
 - a very high proportion of women working in the community sector particularly considering the time taken out of employment to focus on family and other responsibilities. The community services workforce is among the most feminised in the Australian labour force - around 84.4% of people doing community service jobs in the ACT are women, (AIHW 2001, *Australia's welfare 2001*, p. 22).

Adding to this disparity, the AIHW has also found that

Men working in the health and community services industries tended to be concentrated in high-income occupations. By comparison, those occupations in which almost all were women had much lower proportions of workers with weekly incomes of \$1,000 or more (AIHW, *Health and Community Services Workforce 2001*, p. 15).

Back to the issue of sustainability:

It is no longer tenable, or sustainable, to think of community services as a marginal area of activity, a social function that operates only in an organic way, and which does not need the kind of systems and resources that other forms of activity need (like business, employment, government).

Community services are now a kind of industry. A special kind of industry, it is true. It certainly doesn't fit the traditional mould of an industry. But not much these days does. We are seeing a reshaping of Australia's economic structure, and the expansion of community services is an important part of that.

We are witnessing a time when the labour market and the private housing market are both failing more and more Australians, leading us to need more community services. And in this respect one of our distinctive (and even a little odd) roles as community sector organisations is to advocate for systemic changes that would make some of our work obsolete. This is the ultimate goal that many of us work towards – to fundamentally shift structural inequity such that we are no longer needed to work the jobs that we do.

But in an immediate sense, the work we do is vital, and growing. (Note Community Sector Survey – 10,000 more services delivered, 15,000 people turned away). This is why the viability of community organisations is everyone's business, not just the business of those of us who are employed in this sector. We all have an obligation to ensure that our social policy, and social action is geared in the right direction, to remind each other that where lives are at stake we must continue to mount campaigns that keep this sector alive.

The Universal Declaration of Human rights states that *Recognition of the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.*

If we cannot offer each other a hand up when we most need it, what then? If we continue to bleed the community sector of its workers, underpay and under resource them, what is the cost? Unless every person is given access to the tools that enable them to fully reach their potential then we sell ourselves short.

It impacts poorly on all of us. It tells a story of a world where the economy overshadows all else, where humans matter so little compared to the mighty dollar. Our job, then, should we accept it, is to turn this around before the message self destructs along with the messenger. And if it cannot be done in Canberra – the wealthiest jurisdiction in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, where can it be done?