



## Measuring the outcomes of community organisations

### *Background paper*

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### Introduction

The impact of community activity on children and young people can be long term, in part because interventions may occur during developmentally critical periods. Adults, and the organisations they populate, often have the capacity and resources to give voice when their needs or wants are not met. This is less so for children and young people. In short children and young people are more likely to lose out if systems for measuring outcomes for their benefit are not rigorous.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth is undertaking a major new project that will review evidence, practice and policy concerning the measurement of the outcomes of community organisations, in particular the contribution to the wellbeing of children and young people.

There is an old adage: "What gets measured gets done" (Moore et. al., 2003:5). Similarly UNICEF (2008: 31), in more precise language, has argued that:

Without definitions there can be no measurement; without measurement there can be no data; without data there can be no monitoring; and without monitoring there can be no evidence-based policy, effective advocacy, or public accountability.

Too often systems measure and monitor outputs (what is done) rather than outcomes (what is achieved) and rarely measure more broadly defined and enduring impacts (what change has resulted). Public sector agencies, with far greater resources than community organisations, are often better able to inform their development through access to more rigorous measures.

While any one community organisation or government agency may apply their own definitions, measures and collect data for monitoring, if such efforts occur in the absence of an *agreed* framework, then it is not possible to aggregated or compare the contributions of organisations across public, not for profit, philanthropic or business sectors.

Using a different framework for outcome measurement is likely to be inefficient (through the risk of adding to existing reporting requirements of community organisations) as well as ineffective (through inappropriate measurement).

An agreed framework for the measurement of outcomes is *necessary* for ensuring that we have a good understanding of the contribution that community organisations make to the wellbeing of children and young people. However alone such a framework is unlikely to be *sufficient* to improve outcomes. Community organisations are likely to benefit from access to rigorous methods that are tailored to their needs and capacity as well as having the wherewithal to implement developments based on such evidence.

## Background

The mission of ARACY is to enhance the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people. In advancing this mission ARACY has two primary goals:

- To promote collaborative research and agenda setting for children and young people.
- To promote the application of research to policy and practice for children and young people.

ARACY has decided to undertake a collaboration project to explore ways of better measuring the outcomes of non-government, not-for-profit community organisations (COs). This is not a research project, but one that seeks to translate into action what we do know.

Issues of sustainability among COs that work with children and youth have been raised through research and consultations by ARACY and others. Sustainability impacts on the quantum and quality of activities and services, including the important role COs perform as advocates on behalf of children and youth. This project will consider these issues in so much as they impact on the ability of COs to measure and work towards improved outcomes for children and young people.

There has recently been attention given to a range of issues associated with COs. The Senate (2008) has reviewed reporting requirements of not for profit organisations. The Commonwealth Government has made a referral to the Productivity Commission for it to conduct a study of the contribution of the not for profit sector. That referral states in part that the Commission will investigate: "options for improving the efficient and effective delivery of government-funded services by community organisations, including improved funding, contractual and reporting arrangements with government, while having regard to the need for transparency and accountability" (Bowen 2009:2).

Carter (2005), in consultation work undertaken for ARACY, identified a number of characteristics of COs about which there is broad agreement (Lyons and Hocking, 2000; Productivity Commission, 2009). These include that community organisations are:

- self-governing and independent of government;
- not for profit - they do not distribute profits to members;
- engage volunteers and/or voluntary participation by members, and;
- provide benefit to members or provide a public benefit.

Community organisations include those that provide charitable, welfare or social services, social enterprise, sporting, cultural, recreational, educational, research, health, community development, housing, civic, advocacy, philanthropic, environmental, international development, business, professional, union and religious organisations.

Community organisations range from national and even multinational corporate entities that are integrated providers of multiple services and activities through to

micro organisations with very specific purposes exclusively operating in discrete locations and entirely reliant on volunteers.

A sense of the diversity of community organisations can be further gleaned from information about the number of organisations, their employed workforce, total income and the proportion of income they derive from governments. The charts that follow summarise information about registered community organisations<sup>1</sup>. The ABS (2008) has estimated that there are 41,000 such organisations in Australia.

Chart 1 summarises information about the proportion of all COs within selected areas of activity and proportion of all CO paid employees in these fields. Cultural, sporting and recreational organisations are numerous, while they employ comparatively few staff. This pattern is even more pronounced for religious organisations. Together these fields comprise two out of every five community organisations, though they employ just less than one in six of all staff working in COs.

Educational and research, health and social service community organisations comprise a relatively small proportion of all community organisations – about 3 out of every ten, but employ three out of every five staff.

**Chart 1: Percentage of total COs and percentage of all CO staff by selected areas of activity, 2006-07 (ABS, 2008)**

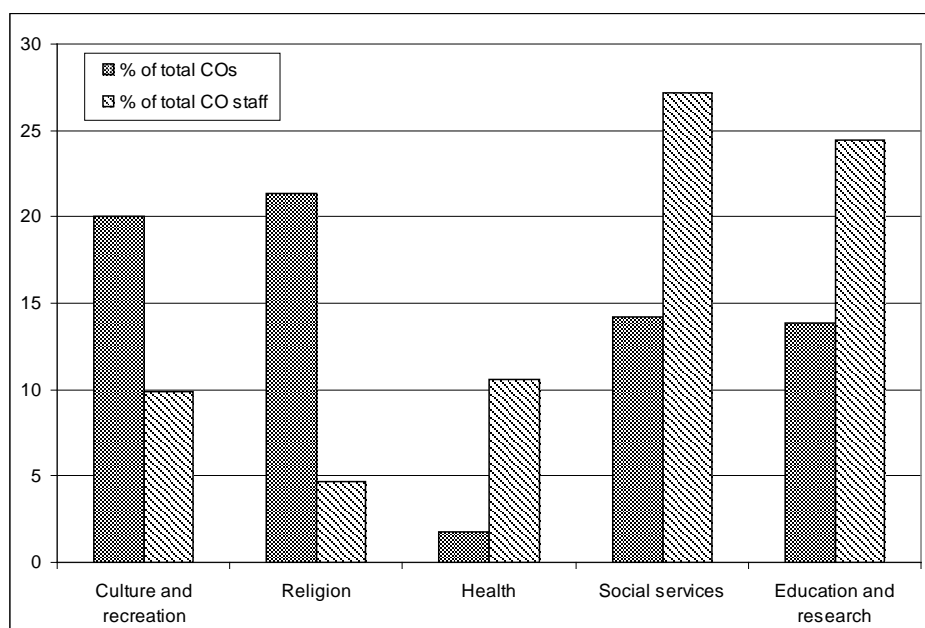
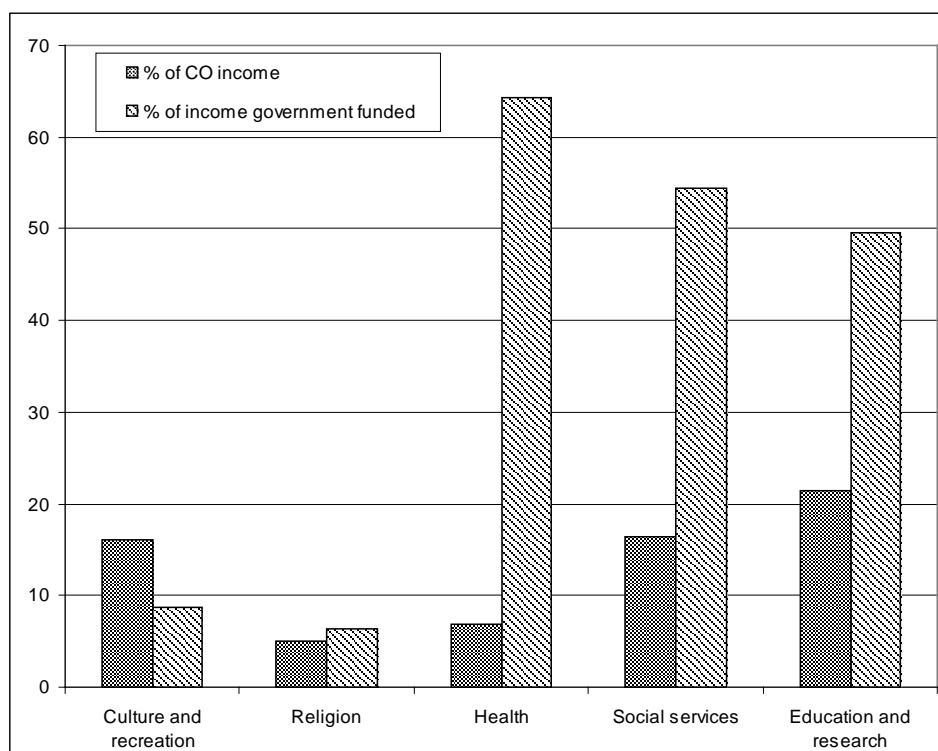


Chart 2 on the following page summarises information regarding the proportion of all income into COs and the proportion of their income that comes from governments. In total these COs had an income in 2006/07 of \$74.5 billion, of which \$24.7 billion, a third, was from governments.

<sup>1</sup> It is relevant to note that this information has only been gathered for registered community organisations. We know from the work of Lyons and Hocking (2000) that there are a great many more, typically very small community organisations that are not registered, possibly as many as 700,000 (Productivity Commission, 2009).

**Chart 2: Percentage of total CO income and percentage of CO income from governments by selected areas of activity, 2006-07 (ABS, 2008)**



Cultural, sporting and recreational organisations receive 16% of all income into community organisations and 8.6% of all the income across these organisations comes from governments. Religious organisations received 5% of all community organisational income, and a similarly small proportion of their income comes from governments.

Health, education and research and social service organisations together receive 44.6% of all income that goes into all community organisations and the proportion of their income coming from government's ranges from a half to two thirds.

Thus religious, cultural, sporting and recreational COs are more numerous and comparatively small, expend proportionately more on non-employee costs and rely very little on government funding compared with education, research, social service or health COs.

Many social service community organisations (SSCOs) have a particular mission to address disadvantage and promote wellbeing, aims central to the purposes of ARACY and a number of issues associated with SSCO are given particular attention herein.

Discussion that follows considers a range of key questions. These are:

- ***What*** problems are we trying to solve?
- ***Why*** are there problems?
- ***Who*** are the relevant stakeholders?

Finally some issues for discussion are suggested.

## What problems?

Good measures and data to assess the impact of COs may help improve the sustainability and public credibility of COs as well as strengthen the advocacy role of COs on behalf of children and youth. Of course the quantification of outcomes is important for informing funding priorities. Policy makers need information, preferably good data, on which to determine priorities for funding, whether between organisations or across programs.

Literature on the measurement of outcomes of COs covers a range of issues. Some of these include:

- ***Community-wide wellbeing indicators.*** Increasingly governments and others are devising community-wide indicators of child and youth wellbeing (ARACY, 2008; AIHW, 2008; DEECD, 2006; DEECD & DPCS, 2008). As the UNICEF quote at the beginning of this paper argues, setting such benchmarks provides a starting point for community-wide efforts, but alone are insufficient to enable an assessment of the impact of the community sector. Some developments, such as those of the Productivity Commission in its report on indigenous disadvantage, do identify strategic change indicators towards which services can contribute (SCRGSP, 2007).
- ***Measuring through-puts not outcomes.*** Wölfl (2003:38) in a comparative study for the OECD on productivity across all service industries points out that for health and community services “the definition of output is not clear”. Cortis (2006:12) in qualitative research regarding the perspective of parents who use non-government family support services, notes that “performance indicator systems in place are designed to capture numeric counts of client turnover or service episodes” and that “quality and outcomes are poorly defined...[and] measurement methods cause critical evidence to be overlooked (p 15)”. Funnell (2006) argues that a focus on monitoring over evaluation contributes to cynicism among personnel who are required to put considerable effort towards collecting information for monitoring knowing that this does not assess performance.
- ***Labour intensity and productivity.*** Neuhoff and Searle (2008), in an American context, claim that many COs are suspicious of efforts to increase their productivity and often confuse cost per output (efficiency) and cost per outcome (effectiveness). The latter, they argue, is of the most importance. Allen Consulting Group (2008) in a report for the Victorian Council of Social Service on productivity among COs noted that there were few studies in Australia on SSCO productivity. The Melbourne Institute (2008:16) notes: “(c)ompared with all industries, the Health and Community Services sector since 1990 has experienced lower growth rates in R&D, patent and design intensities. The overall picture in this industry fits the pattern of other service industries where the role of an individual human input cannot be easily replicated or automated.”
- ***Diversity of organisational measurement tools.*** There are a number of methods applied by COs to help them measure their outcomes and impacts and to inform development. These include Social Return on Investment (nef 2008), Results-Based Accountability (Friedman, 2006), the Logical Framework Approach (AusAid, 2005), counter-factual evaluation of impact (Cummings, 2006) and other methods applied by academic researchers and commercial

consultants (see the Australian Evaluation Society at <http://www.aes.asn.au/>).

Leigh (2009), in a discussion of what evidence might be used by social policy makers, argues for the application of a hierarchy of empirical evidence. Similarly Funnell (2006) advocates for mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative, that she argues should be suited to specific tasks for evaluation.

There seems to be little evidence strongly in favour of any one technique for measuring outcomes. Capacity constraints of COs are likely to influence take-up, especially as some techniques require significant resources for implementation and therefore may not be feasible for use by very small COs, of which there are a great many. In this context the Productivity Commission's (2009: 37) observation that "performance indicators which add unnecessarily to costs without improving quality" is an issue.

Consultations and surveys among COs have recorded concerns for the sustainability or viability of COs (Carter, 2005; Carter and Donovan, 2004; ACOSS, 2005 & 2008; Macquarie Group Foundation, 2008). These often self-reported concerns by COs have also been supported by other evidence. Key findings include:

- ***High administrative burdens for SSCOs.*** Ryan et. al. (2008) has documented the multiple sources of funding and the associated inconsistent or incompatible accountability requirements placed on COs. Baulderstone (2006) argues that the move by governments to contracting out of services to SSCOs in the 1980s both increased the burden of accountability and had a negative impact on relations between government and SSCOs. Lyons (2009) has argued that such out-sourcing has been less common than many assume.
- ***Rapid growth and increasing reliance on government funding by SSCOs.*** Financially SSCOs have experienced rapid growth<sup>2</sup> with an even greater rate of growth in reliance on government funding<sup>3</sup>.
- ***Rising value but declining proportion of donations to SSCOs.*** Reflecting growing prosperity in the community, individual donations to SSCOs have grown (DFaCS, 2005). However, individual giving into the SSCOs sector as a proportion of all giving seems to be in decline – other nonprofits, in particular overseas aid and environmental causes, are benefiting much more<sup>4</sup>.
- ***Older and ageing paid and volunteer workforce.*** Among young people aged 18 to 24 years the median annual hours of volunteering into all not-for-profit sectors declined from 60 in 1995 to 48 in 2006. Meagher and Healy (2005:9), in a study of the paid care workforce have noted that it is "relatively old, and ageing faster than the labour force as a whole". Young

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<sup>2</sup> AIHW (2007) estimates that from 1998-99 to 2005-06 total expenditure by non-government community service organisations (NGCSO) increased, in constant 2005-06 prices, from 14.1 billion to 20.3 billion.

<sup>3</sup> AIHW (2007) estimates that in 1998-99 government funding to NGCSO accounted for 56.7% of all income and by 2005-06 this had risen to 62.4%.

<sup>4</sup> Lyons and Hocking (2000) estimated that in 1997 community and welfare sector received 15.8% of all donations by individuals made across the entire not-for-profit sector, but by 2005 this had declined to 12.8% (FaCS, 2005). These are difference survey sources and some caution needs to be exercised in comparisons.

people are gaining less exposure to the not-for-profit sector, and the not-for-profit sector is benefiting less from their input.

- ***Somewhat more volunteers, but for significantly less time.*** The rate of volunteering - the proportion of the total population who volunteer - into all community organisations rose from 24% in 1995 to 35% in 2006 (ABS, 2007). However over those same years the median hours volunteered annually declined from 74 to 56<sup>5</sup>.

## Why do we have these problems?

Moore et. al (2003:5), in an American context, noted that “compared with the business world and the public health field, indicators are used far less often in the broader social policy arena, where they are potentially just as helpful.” Similarly, in a review of the scope for statistical data linkages<sup>6</sup> the Community Services Ministers’ Advisory Council (2004) noted that health data linkage projects were well developed compared with community services. If assistance is to be provided in the movement towards a stronger evidence base across COs, it will be helpful to understand why it is that short-comings are evident.

Specific issues and factors that work against a culture among COs of openness and evidence-based development include:

- ***Capacity.*** There are many sources that point to sustainability issues for COs. Possession of a good research and development capacity is related to sustainability and to organisational size. There is evidence that small organisations in the community sector struggle by comparison with larger organisations (Lyons and Nyland, 1995. ACOSS, 2005). Flack and Ryan (2005) and the Senate (2008) have documented multiple and inconsistent accountability requirements placed by funding providers on COs. This may contribute to ‘accountability burnout’ – an intolerance of quantitative measures and an unwillingness to engage in development for fear that administrative burdens will increase further. For many COs the current global financial crisis will lead to a rise in demand that may not be matched by funding. If associated public sector fiscal restraint leads to reduced funding, or increased competition in order to facilitate improvements in productivity, there will be further consequences.
- ***Complexity of matters.*** ACOSS (2008) has noted that SSCOs report that clients are presenting with increasingly complex needs. Factors of co-morbidity can include substance abuse, domestic violence and poor mental health. COs often specialise in the provision of specific types as well as for particular demographically and geographically defined community groups. Moore (2008) argues that greater integration is needed of services, yet among COs the structure of the sector, comprising highly specialise organisations, suggests that both an evidence base and, in practice, such integration will be difficult. If the diverse and defused structure of SSCOs and COs are to be compared for effectiveness then good measures and

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<sup>5</sup> Median hours is considered a better measure of volunteering contributions as average hours is a distorted measure as a result of a very small number of people, mostly those who are older, volunteering very many hours.

<sup>6</sup> Data linkages identify individuals about whom data has been collected across different sets and then these are linked. This allows for access to much more information than in a single data set and can be longitudinal.

sophisticated data are needed. Without this it is not possible to monitor if, for example, SSCOs are 'creaming' - serving those with low levels of disadvantage leading to more funding that is linked to high flow-through (Neuhoff and Searle, 2008).

- ***Few pressures for quality.*** Neuhoff and Searle (2008) point out that unlike the business sector, there are few external pressures on nonprofits to attend to improving productivity or quality. Funding programs mostly rely on cost, output and flow-through indicators, despite some moves towards outcome indicators for accountability. Further, as Lyons (2009) has pointed out, even to those SSCOs that rely on government for a comparative large proportion of their income, this source is still only a supplement, not full funding.

Government and community support can or should be related to the contribution to outcomes of COs. However, some activities may be easier to measure than others. Health COs are often large, enjoy strong and direct relationships with the research community and focus on discrete problems of illness or injury that are readily measured. In this context it is not surprising that health organisations have a strong culture of commitment to evidence based approaches. Smaller COs often have little access to resources for research and development and some work to address human conditions such as homelessness, substance abuse or domestic violence that are have complex social, economic and cultural antecedents. For these COs fostering a culture that values an evidence based approach is undermined by operational realities – costs for making such commitments are certain while the benefits derived are unclear.

## Relevant stakeholders

Carter (2005:7) in an ARACY report on consultations with COs stated that there "is no 'children's sector'...there are a plethora of sub sectors in education, child health, youth services, child welfare, disability, child protection, family support, child care, early childhood education and more.<sup>7</sup>" This observation suggests that, when considering stakeholders a broad perspective might be most appropriate.

Community activity is mostly *not* organised around children and youth *per se*. Indirect engagement by COs with children and youth – through contact with parents or via adult-defined communities of interest (cultural, occupational etc) - may diminish the capacity of COs to identify their affect on child and youth wellbeing.

The sections that follow summarises key characteristics of relevant stakeholders.

### Community Organisations

Among COs key divides include:

- ***Scope, focus and type of activities.*** These may be population-based, such those that are child and youth specific, family focussed or generic and/or based on different activities, such as housing assistance, welfare, sporting etc. and/or geographic.

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to these, organisations providing employment services for young people, and for children and youth sporting, recreational, and cultural or arts organisations, might be added – these are significant providers, although often left outside a dominant social service or 'welfare' perspective.

- **Capacity.** Larger agencies often possess an in-house research and development capacity while smaller agencies often rely on peak bodies for strategic direction.
- **Funding source.** For larger COs, multiple sources of funding seem to contribute to greater capacity (ACOSS, 2005). For smaller organisations a high proportion of costs go towards meeting accountability requirements (Ryan et. al., 2008).
- **Competitive-cooperative environment.** There are varying degrees of competitiveness or cooperation among COs. In some areas of activity, such as childcare and employment services as well as cultural sporting/fitness and recreation - for-profit providers are active.

## Policy Makers

Public policy makers in various roles across local<sup>8</sup>, state and commonwealth governments will be important to this project. Philanthropic entities are an important source of income for COs, partly because of flexibility in funding.

The roles of policy makers may be distinguished to include:

- **Program administrators and funding providers.** Typically these work in discrete sectors, jurisdictions or departments that only occasionally cooperate.
- **Data custodians and statistical agencies.** These are often, but not always, departmental program managers. In the case of some Commonwealth-State funded programs, such as Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), the data custodian may be other agencies such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). The ABS and AIHW are repositories for linked data, custodians and, in the case of the ABS with a legislative basis to its operations, in effect, policy makers regarding research output.

## Researchers

Researchers in this field may be categorised as follows:

- **CO-based.** This is a small research community, mostly located in peak bodies and corporate COs.
- **Private consultants.** The Australasian Evaluation Society lists 60 private consulting companies in Australia that comply with its code of ethics for evaluators. Many of these companies are contracted by government to undertake evaluations of human services and CO activity.
- **University-based researchers.** A range of university based research centres specialise in social service, social policy and program evaluation research.

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<sup>8</sup> While local governments are not large providers of funding to COs, they are often significant providers of land or infrastructure for sporting and cultural CO activities.

## Issues

Readers are invited to provide to ARACY comments about this paper and the project of which it is part. The following issues and questions are among some that might be considered in response.

These issues and questions include:

- ***Towards an agreed framework for outcome measurement.*** Is this a desirable and realistic aim? How can such a framework include the outcomes of the range of community organisational activity and be relevant to public sector, philanthropic and other agencies?
- ***Addressing weaknesses and threats.*** What barriers are there to improving the measurement of outcomes across COs? How can we make such measures relevant to COs across different areas of activity and those that have varying capacity? What partnerships or complementary roles might best be performed among COs, researchers and governments?
- ***Immediate priorities.*** Where should we go from here? Which community organisation, research, public sector, philanthropic or other interests are likely to engage with this agenda?

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