

NZCOSS: The Story of a National Social Service Umbrella Organisation

Author's note: this paper does not claim to be 'the' definitive history of NZCOSS. All the opinions expressed in it are entirely my own. I am still receiving historical files from COSS contacts and intend to update this research over time. In particular I am interested in exploring further the role that COSS have played in shaping social policy at the regional/local level, and the impacts that changing social policies have had on COSS and the organisations they serve. I welcome comment and feedback, especially from people who have been involved in COSS over time.

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Introduction

This paper reviews the development of the New Zealand Council of Social Services – Te Kaunihera Ratonga Tauwhiro o Aotearoa – over the last three decades; its place in the social policy landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand, and how it has responded to, and been affected by, emerging trends in social and economic policy.¹ At times, challenged by capacity issues and the lack of a clearly articulated social mission, NZCOSS has struggled to maintain a visible and effective policy presence. The very diversity of its membership base, while commonly seen as a strength, has also generated significant organisational challenges.

The current political context, focused as it is on 'partnership' and collaboration, may, however, herald the beginning of a new era for NZCOSS. Though the language of partnership is fraught with pitfalls, spaces for genuinely collaborative initiatives do exist, and NZCOSS stands in an ideal position to act as a broker for these at both local and national levels.

As a national social service umbrella organisation, any review of NZCOSS' place in the policy landscape would not be complete without a consideration of the dynamics of its relationships with other national umbrella organisations. Each of the three umbrella groups considered in this paper – NZCOSS, the New Zealand Federation of Voluntary Welfare Organisations and the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services – have struggled at times to maintain their advocacy roles and policy influence. Though they are healthy now, relationships between the three organisations have also become strained on occasion. In addition, a level of confusion exists both within and outside government over their respective roles and identities. For these and other reasons, pressures have subsequently been brought to bear on NZCOSS and its counterparts to merge into a single 'peak body', on the premise that government/sector relations and policy development would be streamlined and strengthened by such a process.²

Certainly, from a strategic perspective, there are strong arguments for social service organisations to present a more confident and articulate national policy agenda, and umbrella groups have a key role in facilitating this. The conclusion, however, is that there are no easy answers to the question of national representation in the post-modern, culturally complex context of the New Zealand tangata whenua, community and voluntary sector. In the meantime, if it can overcome its capacity challenges, NZCOSS has a continuing role to play as a collaborative and supportive sector partner, with the potential to expand into a niche role as an effective agent for social change.

¹ Grateful thanks to David Robinson, Pat Hanley, Michael Woodcock, Tina Reid, Sharon Torstenson and Paul Barber for their insights and comments on various drafts. None of them are responsible for the final result.

² The term 'peak body' is not widely used in New Zealand; it has been used in this paper as a conceptual tool.

The Origins of NZCOSS

On the 10th of November 1975, the then Minister of Social Welfare, Norman King, signed an order establishing the New Zealand Council of Social Service, under the Department of Social Welfare Act 1971. The organisation, as it was then, operated essentially as a quasi-governmental body, with a brief to make recommendations and give advice to the Minister, encourage and promote cooperation and coordination in social welfare, and promote local participation in social welfare through the formation and coordination of district and regional COSS (Torstonson, 2007: pers. comm.).

NZCOSS emerged during a period of enormous generational change in New Zealand, and at a time when community development was beginning to be seen as a social service specialization in its own right (Dyce, 2007:15). By the time it was formed, various local and district COSS had already been operating for several years, initiated by local community groups. Social policies during the post-war Keynesian economic era had been framed by a general acceptance of the central role of the state in ensuring the welfare of its citizens (Cheyne, O'Brien and Belgrave 2005:19), and in the 1970s, this was extended to include a role for the state in actively promoting community development (Larner and Craig, 2002:14), which is presumably why the government of the time took steps to form NZCOSS.

It took a further decade for NZCOSS to emerge as a fully fledged voluntary organisation. Prompted by a move in 1986 by then Attorney General, Geoffrey Palmer, and the Minister of Social Welfare, Michael Cullen, to disestablish the organisation, as part of Palmer's 'great quango hunt', community representatives from various local COSS took ownership of it, deciding to establish a fully independent voluntary entity (Robinson, 2007: pers. comm; Torstonson, 2007: pers. comm.).

The move to establish NZCOSS as a voluntary organisation was not opposed by central government. Rather, there was 'an openness from government' to its establishment (Robinson, 2007: pers. comm.). In 1987, the same Minister of Social Welfare opened the inaugural NZCOSS Conference, and the government provided \$40,000 per annum to host an AGM and employ a half-time staff member. The New Zealand Council of Social Services thus took its place as a national social service umbrella organisation, alongside other national entities such as the New Zealand Federation of Voluntary Welfare Organisations, formed in 1969, and the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, formed in the 1960s.³

In its new incarnation, NZCOSS sought, and continues to seek, to provide local and regional COSS networks with information, support and a national voice; to encourage the development of COSS networks in new areas; and more generally, to act as a conduit for social change and community development (NZCOSS, 2001:1). As such, its operation is, and has always been, a 'bottom-up' one, driven by the diversity of its members' needs.⁴

The very diversity of its membership base has simultaneously been a strength and a weakness for NZCOSS. Bringing together many of the smallest, least well-represented groups in the country, as well as some of the largest COSS, it can rightfully claim strength in diversity. Yet the complexity of its members and their needs also presents the organisation with a major challenge - both in terms of servicing those needs, and in terms of gathering a clear mandate. In addition, while NZCOSS may have emerged from, and

³ NZCCSS staff confirm that the origins were in the 1960s; exactly when requires further research.

⁴ Even before its establishment as a voluntary organisation, NZCOSS had been driven by 'bottom-up' processes. In its 1976 guide, "Establishing District Councils of Social Service", NZCOSS stipulated that it would provide assistance and guidance where requested, but would not impose a structure. It recognised that there were differences between districts and considered that "district councils should arise from local needs and initiative." (Torstonson, 2007: pers. comm.)

mirrored, the social justice consensus which prevailed at the time, when times changed, an implicit understanding of itself was not necessarily enough to bolster it against the winds of political change.

The New Zealand Political Context: 1980s and 1990s

By the time the 'new', voluntary, NZCOSS emerged, the great New Zealand neo-liberal experiment was well under way. The fourth Labour government laid the economic foundations for dramatic social service reform through the privatisation and restructuring of state assets, leading to unprecedented levels of unemployment. In 1990, the incoming National government picked up where Labour had left off, using the pretext of a budget deficit blow-out to dramatically reduce benefit levels, and subsequently introducing a systematic package of health, welfare, and employment law reforms (Cheyne, O'Brien and Belgrave, 2005: 37-41).

As well as dealing with the real life consequences of the reforms, community and social service organisations came face to face with a restructured public service and a radical change in funding arrangements. From the early 1990s, grant-based funding ceased for many organisations, including umbrella groups. In its place, a new contract-based funding regime emerged, underpinned by the assumptions of agency theory.⁵ The new regime emphasised narrowly specified outputs and funding for specific projects, in the process challenging voluntary organisations' internal value systems and operational focus (Craig and Larnar, 2002: 13).

Like most community sector organisations, NZCOSS was diverted by, and challenged to respond to, the emerging economic and social policy agenda. During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, NZCOSS undertook work on various social issues, including research into home-based care and deinstitutionalisation (Robinson, 2007: pers. comm.). But like many others, much of its energy was spent fighting a rearguard action in 'various small skirmishes', as it sought to come to grips with and influence funding policy (Robinson, 2007: pers. comm.).

Towards the end of the 1990s, issues of capacity, poor governance and lack of a sufficiently clearly articulated sense of itself – what by then was commonly coming to be called a 'mission' – made it increasingly difficult for NZCOSS to maintain a stable, visible organisation and an effective policy presence. Perhaps also reflecting the conflicts going on around it, pressures came to a head in late 2002, when internal difficulties – essentially a fundamental disagreement about the organisation's direction – led NZCOSS to the brink of collapse. NZCOSS has spent much of the ensuing five years rebuilding its operations and reestablishing its place in the sector landscape.

Neo-Liberal to Neo-Social?

The changes wrought by the neo-liberal experiment thus had profound impacts on sector/government relations and on community organisations, including NZCOSS. However, some authors have suggested that they also contained the seeds of the current era of partnership-oriented social governance (Larnar and Butler, 2004:16; Craig and Larnar, 2002:10). Neo-liberalism is characterised by a focus on decentralisation, and an interest in the value of local knowledge in achieving governmental efficiencies, in avoiding overlaps and duplication, and in fostering responsibility among 'civil society' groups (Bennett, 1990). Thus, in social welfare, during the height of neo-liberalism, partnership approaches such

⁵ Agency theory frames relationships between government and voluntary organisations as a series of contracts, to be delivered upon as efficiently as possible (see Cribb, 2006 for an excellent overview of the role of agency theory in shaping the contracting system in New Zealand).

as the Strengthening Families programme emerged, and regional and local funding committees were established.

Craig and Larner (2002:18) have suggested that the rise of local partnerships signals neither a return to social democracy nor a continuation of neo-liberalism, but rather, can be usefully understood as 'an integral part of a new form of social governance that attempts to send globally legible signals about social stability and inclusivity' As such, they claim, in Aotearoa New Zealand, local partnerships are a 'post-welfarist, post-neoliberal' – or 'neo-social' – form of social governance (2002:5).⁶ Local partnerships, argue Larner and Butler, impose new expectations on government agencies themselves, creating an emerging role for a 'partnering state', albeit one still dominated by a neo-liberal economic agenda (2004:19).⁷

Within this emerging context, social service organisations have worked hard to reposition themselves, learning new ways to articulate grass roots claims and contest policy agendas, positioning themselves in relation to other organisations and in terms of how they can best serve particular populations and local needs. It is within this context that we now turn to consider a potential future role for NZCOSS.

The Potential for Meaningful Partnership

There is now widespread interest in New Zealand in pursuing collaborative approaches to social policy issues. The findings of the Community and Voluntary Sector Working Party (2001) and Treasury's *Review of the Centre* (2002), for instance, both recommended multi-agency approaches to cross-cutting problems. However, long before the emergence of the current partnership era – from at least the early 1980s – community development practitioners, academics and policy-makers, influenced by international trends and debates, sought to promote various community-driven initiatives, such as the Healthy Cities projects and Safer Community Councils. Government interest in and support then followed (Robinson, 2007: pers. comm.).

Here, as internationally, local programmes are targeted at strengthening local communities and promoting well-being and social inclusion, through 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' approaches, and based on the idea that communities themselves have the best knowledge of their social service issues and needs, or could readily determine these if they had the resources to do so (Cox 1997, Jessop 1999). Consequently, community organisations have become 'a key site for decentralised professional and technical capacity' (Craig and Larner, 2002: 14).

As noted, one of NZCOSS' key strengths – probably its defining one – is its diverse and well-established network of Councils of Social Services. Many COSS have played central roles in fostering collaborative working relationships between community organisations and local authorities. Following the introduction of the Local Government Act 2003, local authorities have also increasingly adopted coordinative roles around issues such as social well being, many engaging with COSS in the process (Johnston, Cheyne and Parker,

⁶ This new period, they suggest, involves 'a turning of broader liberalism back towards its social face, presenting 'social inclusion' as a strategic and ideological stance, while at the same time holding fiercely to basic liberal economic management, and constructing various 'rubrics of inclusion' through which the participation of various actors, including local governments, NGOs and other subjects is invited in acceptable, generally depoliticised and technical terms'. 'The long term outcomes of this current social turn are not however clear: it could as easily constitute a momentary correction within a broad liberal trajectory, as a move towards a new social democracy' (2002:18).

⁷ Larner and Butler argue that there are clearly important continuities with the earlier neoliberal period, particularly the emphasis on 'competitive contractualism', which make it clear that the emerging 'partnering state' remains a neo-liberal state form (2004:19).

2006). Currently, considerable interest is also being shown by Family and Community Services in engaging with local communities via COSS networks.

Well-resourced COSS with strong community links are therefore already providing safe spaces for open-ended deliberation on emerging issues, and it is part of NZCOSS' brief to foster and encourage these activities.⁸ Thus, a role may be developing for NZCOSS to act as a 'strategic broker' of local partnership initiatives, in liaison with local communities, central and local government, and other stakeholders.

Yet there are many pitfalls to the partnership approach. While partnerships are usually seen as an opportunity for building greater social cohesion, the language of partnership and devolution may also be used to mask moves towards privatisation of services, offloading the costs of provision onto under-resourced communities (Casswell, 2001: 23). 'Strategic adaptation' to managerialism – 'massaging needs so that they appear to fit within government objectives' – can also cause communities to end up reflecting government priorities, rather than defining and articulating their own needs (Sawer and Jupp, 1996:8). In the post-modern context, communities themselves are now understood as 'intrinsically pluralist' environments, within which there may be potentially irreconcilable interests, unequal hierarchies of power, and where mandates may be constantly challenged, making it difficult to establish ground-rules for engagement (Craig and Lerner, 2002:20). Good social outcomes, therefore, depend on such things as sufficient resourcing, good process, longer time frames, trusting relationships, attention to unequal power relationships, sharing of costs and benefits, and an understanding of the constraints that each partner is working with (see, e.g., Karger et al, 2007: 8, Matheson et al, 2005:1; Maynard and Wood, 2002:89).⁹

Some would query, though, how equal a 'partnership' between government and community organisations can ever be, particularly where the state uses the vulnerability or instability of local groups to secure compliance with its own agenda; the failure of the Treaty of Waitangi to deliver genuine 'partnership' for Maori being a case in point (Hanley, 2007: pers. comm.; Henare, 1999:56). Indeed, much of the research elsewhere on new forms of governance suggests that communities and citizens remain on the margins of power in the new partnerships that have emerged. By vesting responsibility at the very local level, communities are then set up to be blamed if those programmes fail (Taylor, 2006:21).

The language of partnership, it seems, is loaded, and any potential 'partners' must therefore tread carefully. Another key question in all of this for NZCOSS is its capacity to engage in an effective and meaningful way. Like other umbrella organisations, NZCOSS has been perpetually under-resourced, and almost constantly in survival mode. It has also suffered from lack of clear mechanisms by which to gather a strong mandate for action from its membership.

However, if these issues can be overcome, if local COSS want to be involved, and if a clear framework for engagement can be developed, then NZCOSS has the potential to act as a conduit for enabling and facilitating community-based initiatives to inform social policy both at local and central government levels. As Marilyn Taylor from the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of West of England in Bristol commented during a recent visit to New Zealand, social movement theory has demonstrated how the opening up of

⁸ Maddison and Denniss (2005: 379) suggest that the legitimacy of public policy processes and outcomes rests on 'the character and quality of public deliberation, and the relationship between public deliberation and state decision-making'. Along these lines, Robinson and Williams (n.d.:3) argue that 'the key to effective consideration of emerging issues by lay people is that the discussions take place in an environment marked by trust'.

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new political opportunities ‘produces new resources, and the potential for new alliances and realignments of power’ (2006:23). To the extent that such projects facilitate capacity building in Māori communities, they will also contribute to meeting NZCOSS’ commitment to uphold Te Tiriti O Waitangi. Indeed, by virtue of their decentralised nature, local COSS carry great potential to engage with Maori, since Maori/iwi organisations tend to be organised regionally and locally rather than nationally.

For NZCOSS, questions of capacity remain. Closely tied to these are issues of mission clarity (or rather the lack of it) and in particular, the need to develop a clearer niche vis-à-vis other umbrella organisations. Indeed, it is impossible to complete this review of NZCOSS’ role in the social policy landscape without considering the dynamics of its relationships with other national umbrella organisations, and the implications for the sector as a whole.

Social Service Umbrella Organisations in New Zealand: The ‘Peak Body’ Debate

It is important to review the relationships between NZCOSS and its major counterparts – in particular the NZ Federation of Voluntary Welfare Organisations and the NZ Council of Christian Social Services¹⁰ – since none of them operate in isolation, and when considered together they provide a key point of policy and operational contact between community organisations and government.

The three social service umbrella organisations have different but overlapping constituencies and organisational remits. NZCOSS, as discussed, is defined by its extensive network of local COSS, of which there are around 50, each with its own constituent network, and has a strong community development agenda. NZFVWO’s membership consists of around 140 voluntary sector organisations, both large and small. It was formed after a number of large service organisations identified a need to better coordinate their national appeal schedules, and until fairly recently has concentrated its activities at the national level. NZCCSS, through its six member denominations, supports around 500 social service delivery sites throughout New Zealand and has strengths in policy development and research. Each organisation aims to play both a resourcing role for its members and, to varying degrees, an advocacy role on wider sector issues. While there is an inherent blurring between umbrella groups at all levels of operation, particularly at the grassroots, all of them are aware of this confusion and have been seeking in good faith to clarify their respective niches in the sector.

All three umbrella organisations have struggled at times to maintain their roles as effective policy advocates. Unlike many groups, they have continued to be funded at least to some extent for their representational roles. Yet arguably, an increasing emphasis on their contractual roles as service providers, combined with a dependence on continued government funding, has squeezed their ability either to effectively represent their members or to lead the national discourse on social policy.

Notably, the Council of Christian Social Services has tended to be more outspoken, primarily because it has always had a strong mission to provide independent research and policy advice. Both NZFVWO and NZCOSS have been more focused on member resourcing and support, and as such have not had not such focussed policy roles (Reid, 2007: pers. comm.) Other factors in NZCCSS’s relative outspokenness may have been its clear Christian philosophy, perhaps a less pressing need to consult and negotiate with

¹⁰ Over the last few years several other national social service umbrella organisations have also emerged, such as Social Service Providers Aotearoa and Te Kahui Atawhai O Te Motu. However, the key relationships for many years have been that between NZCOSS, NZFVWO and NZCCSS, and these are accordingly the focus of this paper.

such extensive member networks, and/or somewhat less dependence on government funding for survival (Hanley, 2007: pers. comm.; Robinson, 2007: pers. comm.). It is debatable, though, how much policy influence any of the umbrella groups have had in recent years, as dialogue with government has become increasingly supplanted by debates about how to best meet contract requirements and the increasing demands of government to manage in particular ways, as perhaps best illustrated by the discourse on 'capacity building' as a route to 'professionalise' the sector.

Relationships between the three organisations may also have been affected by the contracting regime. As Cribb argues, contractualism encourages competition between providers, undermining interagency trust (2006:12), and this has at times perhaps led umbrella groups to seek to define themselves in opposition, rather than relationship, to each other. Rivalries between the groups became particularly intense during the late 1990s, only to be further aggravated by the National-NZ First coalition government's rather clumsy attempt in 1998 to merge the three organisations through the vehicle of a single, substantially reduced, funding contract.¹¹

While relationships may well have been affected by the contracting regime, it may be too easy to place all of the blame in that particular basket. Robinson has argued that competitive tendencies between umbrella groups, personality conflicts, and patch protection issues all pre-dated the emergence of contracting, diminishing their effectiveness and arguably, the policy influence of the sector overall (2007: pers. comm.).¹²

Indeed, as Robinson has suggested, it may well be the case, perhaps ironically, that the need to present a united front on common issues – such as contracting – has served ultimately to improve working relationships between the umbrella groups. Between 1999 and 2001, for instance, the three organisations negotiated a joint contract in response to the threat of de-funding from government (Reid, 2007: pers. comm.) Since then, there have been ongoing efforts to work more consistently together. A Joint Umbrella Accord between the three groups, prompted initially by the failed merger, has since been the subject of much discussion, and seen as a way of developing a framework for positive working relations. NZCOSS and NZFVWO in particular currently have close working relationships on a number of strategic issues, including a new project, working jointly with Social Services Waikato and the Service and Food Workers Union, to promote effective employment practices in the community sector, as well as a monthly show on Access Radio called Collaborative Voices, broadcast by 11 stations around New Zealand.

As noted, some lack of clarity around respective roles does, however, continue to exist. Perhaps understandably, this has been seized upon by successive governments, and others, as a justification for rationalising the three organisations into one 'peak body', as was attempted in 1998.¹³ Comparisons are sometimes made with the Australian situation, where one organisation – the Australian Council of Social Service – acts as the nationwide coordinating body for social and community service providers (Mendes, 2006). From the

¹¹ Overall, funding was cut by 50 per cent (Torstonson, 2007: pers. comm.) The situation was resolved with the election of the 1999 Labour/Alliance government, when the three organisations were once again awarded separate contracts.

¹² For instance, in 1998, Prime Minister Bolger, concerned that the sector was shaping up as a significant force, organised a meeting between key sector leaders and officials from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. However, according to one participant, 'everyone talked past each other'. A key official later rang to pass on the comment that officials had advised the PM that he 'need not worry' (Robinson, 2007: pers. comm.).

¹³ While duplication may have been the justification, it was widely considered at the time that the attempted merger was in reality a retaliation by the government against the umbrella groups' criticisms of its policies (Torstonson, 2007: pers. comm.)

perspective of government, it would seem to be in the interests of the sector to present a more streamlined presence around the policy table.

From the perspective of the sector, it can be argued that there is a need to promote a clearer, more confident social policy agenda, and that umbrella groups have a role – if not a responsibility – to facilitate this. As far back as 1991, Margy-Jean Malcolm, in her study of Canadian voluntary sector/ government relationships, commented on the relative lack of a clearly articulated policy agenda within the New Zealand voluntary sector (1991:25). As Malcolm stated then, the driving force behind the formulation of a clear policy agenda is often 'a strong non-governmental network of interests, who then raise the public profile of their agenda in the media, and in the political arena' (1991:23).

Yet even in the event that key umbrellas were willing to merge, one unified peak body might not provide the answers, either for government or for 'the sector'. As noted earlier, the complex reality of post-modern New Zealand communities means that mandates and agendas are constantly challenged. Reviewing the situation in 2001, the Community and Voluntary Sector Working Party felt strongly that the mix of issues in the New Zealand context did not allow for an easy transfer of models from other countries. Key among these was the significant Maori population, the existence of the Treaty of Waitangi, the presence of distinct, vibrant and sizeable Pacific people's communities, a strongly centralised political system and a level of mistrust and cynicism within the sector, in the wake of two decades of neo-liberal reforms (2001:17). In short, issues of definition and mandate, lack of trust, and a deep concern about inclusive processes have in the past translated into 'a reluctance to allow national and umbrella groups to speak for grassroots organisations' (Baxter, 2003:5).

In recognition of these challenges and contradictions, several positive steps have been taken in recent years – notably the ComVOiceS media initiative, which draws on the diversity of the sector to develop its key messages, and ANGOA, the Association of Non-Government Organisations of Aotearoa. ComVOiceS has done important relationship building work with MPs and officials from within both government and opposition, while ANGOA plays a very useful role within the sector as a neutral umpire for discussion and debate on key issues.

Arguably, though, there is still a need for a national social policy advocacy strategy that draws more clearly on the strengths of the major umbrella groups. ComVOiceS has yet to deal with any significantly controversial issues; and although the distinction is a murky one, arguably it is concerned more with building good public relations than with advocacy. The government's antagonism towards the Community Sector Taskforce's Treaty-based model, the advocacy debate within the health sector, and the uncertainty surrounding the future eligibility of advocacy-based organisations for charity status all provide further examples of the ways in which structural pressures can come to bear when organisations seek to strengthen or promote their advocacy roles.

This is where umbrella organisations, as 'peak bodies', may have an important role. Governments elsewhere have recognised that they have a role to play in creating a climate of participatory governance through adequate resourcing of peaks, even if this process sometimes generates dissent (Maddison and Denniss, 2005:374; Sawyer and Jupp, 1996:1). As the Community and Voluntary Sector Working Party reported in 2001, lack of investment by government in umbrella, national and strategic groups in New Zealand has weakened the development of the community sector overall (2001). While experience in Australia and elsewhere,¹⁴ and even here, shows that governments often

¹⁴ Sawyer has argued that rigid adherence to economic rationalism by Australian and Canadian governments has led to a 'discursive shift', where the state now has less tolerance for public discontent and citizen activism

move to withdraw funding when peaks advocate or lobby on controversial issues, to date successive governments in New Zealand have credited umbrella organisations with sufficient legitimacy to continue funding them at least in part based on their representational roles. If any organisation is in a position, therefore, to play an advocacy role on controversial issues, it must surely be the umbrella groups, particularly if they present a united front.

How umbrella groups might seek to develop a more confident and united front on advocacy issues is difficult to say. As one commentator recently put it, 'damned as we are with the task of creating genuinely democratic and collective models of work, home and community, agreeing on our methods and accommodating our diversity will always cause us trouble' (Harré, 2007: C8).

Possible strategies, some of which have already in train, include formal and informal coalitions, forums, and networks and alliances between national, regional and local organisations. These could happen through existing mechanisms such as ANGOA, the Community Sector Taskforce, ComVOiceS, or through new ones. Whatever form/s any strategies take, their strength must be in the diversity of their membership *and* the unity of their message (Malcolm, 1991: 15). They will need to respect and be accountable to the wide diversity of the sector, and to ensure they have a clear mandate for action and clear agreement on processes and goals (Hanley, 2007).

A *quid pro quo* from the government's perspective, if it is to grant more policy space to any combined advocacy strategy – indeed, if it is to continue or increase funding for the umbrella organisations – must be that umbrella organisations themselves become clearer about their respective roles, identities and mandates. This is in their strategic interests as well.

Conclusion

The history of NZCOSS is an interesting one, because it provides a frame within which to look back over the past three decades of political and policy change and consider how this has affected one particular organisation, its relationships with counterpart organisations and government, and its mode of operation. While NZCOSS has battled at times to maintain its place in the sector landscape, the new era of partnership and collaboration potentially holds great promise for this small organisation.

However, there is much ground to be covered before this promise can be translated into concrete reality. Lack of capacity and an uncertain mandate can make it difficult to 'make the leap' when new opportunities present themselves, particularly when an organisation's overall direction is unclear. To this end, NZCOSS is currently undergoing an extensive organisational review, key goals being to clarify NZCOSS' mission and more clearly define its place in the sector landscape .

If it can overcome these issues, and if it can find its feet on the partnership tightrope, NZCOSS has an exciting future. Arguably, there is a distinct niche opening up for NZCOSS as a community-development focused organisation with extensive grassroots networks to support local communities to develop their own solutions to social problems and to bring the voice of those communities into the national policy conversation.

(2002:43). This has manifested as trends towards amalgamation, defunding, reduction in core funding, fickle, sudden and mandatory changes to funding regimes, increasing reliance on competitive tendering and measurable outputs, excessive auditing and review, privileging of non-deliberative forms of consultation, exclusion from key forums, and challenges to their legitimacy (see, for example, Maddison and Denniss 2005, Melville and Perkins 2003; Sawyer 2002, Melville et al 1998).

Social service umbrella groups such as NZCOSS, NZFVWO, NZCCSS and others have a key role to play in developing a clearer, more confident joint strategy on key social policy issues, particularly in the lead-up to the next general election. If they present a more united front, and are prepared to take risks on controversial issues, governments may well sit up and take notice.

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