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CHALLENGING INEQUALITY: SOCIAL ACTION IN AN EVER CHANGING WORLD

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The Community Sector: Ethics and Overview

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Introduction

I have no doubt that your first reaction when you read that I was to participate in the opening plenary session of the ACOSS conference was: Who on earth is she and why is she giving this address? I know this, because this was my response precisely when I was invited to speak. You have to be kidding! I do not have a high profile, I am not a politician, I am not the CEO of a major non-government organization, not a noted author, nor have I achieved high office. Then I thought about it a little more deeply and came to understand that I do indeed have a voice that is important to hear during a conference focused on social action and challenging inequality; a central event for policy makers, researchers, those engaged in social services and advocacy and committed to the values that guide us.

So, what informs what I have to say?

- I was born in Johannesburg, South Africa to parents who were refugees from Nazi Germany.
- I grew up under the Apartheid regime and was exposed from an early age to the impacts of inequality and oppression in that society. I was taken into townships and encouraged to ask questions about why Black people were glaringly disadvantaged? Why were Black men and women not allowed to live together as husband and wife and why were members of the security police raiding their dingy

premises to enforce this law? And why were their children were being reared far away, in so called Homelands?

- I began my professional career during the turmoil of the Soweto riots that marked the start of the youth uprising against Apartheid in 1976; 1977 was the year Steve Biko died in police custody – turbulent times indeed. Later that year, I moved to Cape Town and worked there until 1983 in the townships of Athlone, Langa, Nyanga and Guguletu, confronting the oppressive realities of detention without trial, the demolition of squatter camps in which the most impoverished people struggled for existence, the banning of organizations deemed in opposition to the regime and the almost total absence of services for Black people who suffered every day the inequities of Apartheid. These were dark days when the triumph of a liberated country hosting the successful football World Cup was unimaginable.
- As a young worker confronted with such profound injustice, it was an enormous challenge to find a way to play any meaningful role. Working for the government in that context was unthinkable and it was to the community not-for-profit sector that I turned. Many community organizations, of course, simply toed the official line, working within the suffocating confines of total racial discrimination. But there were others that were up to the challenge of working for meaningful change and committed to the creation of services, even in the most unpromising circumstances – organizations that found a way to be relevant and sustainable. They were capable of remaining true to their values in the most adverse environment and despite government policy. These organizations made a difference.
- I have spent almost my entire working life in the non-government not-for-profit community sector – 27 years in Australia - seeking to challenge and address social inequality in all its guises, much of it in the disability sector.

I am therefore speaking from the coalface – from the personal and professional perspective of somebody who has experienced the consequences of injustice and structural inequality and who has worked to redress it. My voice is that of a witness and of a participant who has worked with passion in even the most challenging political and economic circumstances. And, I am a practitioner who has consciously chosen to work in the not-for-profit community sector because of my understanding of and

commitment to its values and strengths. I am therefore one of the approximately 200 000 community service workers employed across the country with a vision similar to mine – a society based on equality, fairness and social justice – and a belief in the role of the community sector in achieving this goal.¹

The Community Sector: Ethics and Values

What are the values of the community sector?

So what then are the values which underpin the community sector? What is it that drew me to work in this sector all those years ago and do those values still operate in the contemporary context?

In the maelstrom of the Apartheid society, the promise of working in the community sector was the opportunity to:

- Hold in my heart a **vision** of a society at odds with the one of the prevailing government – a non-racist, non-sexist, just community.
- **Think laterally** – to analyse the prevailing problems and to develop innovative practice that could in some way achieve this vision.
- Do whatever was possible to **transfer power** (skills, knowledge, money and other material resources) to those most disadvantaged.
- Work in a way that cut **across the range of social issues** and did not divide people into silos.
- **Advocate** for the most disadvantaged and marginalized members of the community and challenge injustice.
- **Develop social capital** through the voluntary participation of people committed to achieving the goals of the organization, developing informal support networks and contributing to civil society.
- Work in a **democratic** organization.
- **Develop links** with other national and international organizations that were willing to support organizations in challenging the status quo.

¹ In Australia there are approximately 600,000 nonprofit organizations – of which approximately 440,000 are small, unincorporated associations; or less than 160,000 incorporated associations which deliver community services. The ABS has identified less than 59000 'economically significant NFPs' – those that have an active tax role - and only 20000 in the community sector rely on government funding. It is this smaller number of organizations that employ community sector workers. (Productivity Commission Report, 2010).

Hence, work in this context was both practical (in terms of the capacity to deliver innovative services) and political (in terms of the willingness of these organizations to challenge the status quo and address inequality).

What did that look like in practice?

- Within these organizations, we were able to appoint people on the basis of their ability rather than race.
- We could use the resources of the organization to support those with the greatest need, rather than according to stratified entitlements based on race. This meant a direct challenge to the regime as grants were given on a racial basis. We were even expected to allocate motor vehicles which staff members used according to race, something we refused to do. We provided services in communities where none existed.
- We employed strategies, most notably community development practice, to enable people to have a voice, to organize and to take action on their own behalf. This is hardly radical, but in the context of South Africa at that time, this was considered to be treason and activists were punished with imprisonment. Many of the young people I worked with in the late 70s and early 80s became leaders of the School Boycott movement in the 80s. Civil disobedience was clearly part of our practice.
- We created links and alliances with other organizations which supported our ideals - such as trade unions and internationally with funders who were prepared to support this work.

What principles drive community based social service organizations in Australia?

So to the Australian context: What are the value principles that guide the finest work in this sector in Australia? My reading of both the literature (including ACOSS, 2009; ACOSS 2011; NVCO 2011; Our Community 2008) and practice in our society describes clear values and principles for the sector that include:

- **Vision and mission driven:** Work in this sector is mission driven, not market driven. This means that surpluses are reinvested in the community in the form of additional services or increased quality. The altruistic purpose can lead to greater

trust and engagement of marginalized individuals, families and communities. Our vision implies a commitment to working towards sustainable economic, environmental and community development.

- **Independence:** This means exercising the right of people to associate and organize themselves and others, independent of the State.
- **Social justice:** The sector strives to make a difference and promote lasting social, environmental, political and economic change. It does this independent of the State, expressing the right of people to associate and organize themselves and others.
- **Diversity, dignity and respect:** Recognising and celebrating diversity and viewing this as a strength on which we can build our social structure. This also means a commitment to taking account of individual needs and circumstances and developing integrity in relationships.
- **Responsiveness and flexibility:** The sector can provide quality services and be more responsive to emerging or unrecognized needs. Not-for-Profit organisations are not subject to the same political imperatives and do not necessarily share the same silo structure as government organisations. They can respond holistically and flexibly to the full range of needs of the individuals they support.
- **Participation and Empowerment:** Those we serve can participate and be represented in management structures, policy and program development and service delivery processes – this can be an empowering process. A long term commitment to an issue or client group or community brings a potent history that can support a capacity to search for new understandings of social issues of ways of addressing them. The altruistic mission generates goodwill which mobilizes additional human and material resources which can build community cohesion and social capital.
- **Innovation:** A capacity for innovation that includes the ability to anticipate new needs and respond more effectively to entrenched inequality.

In many ways, therefore, the values that motivated me in the early years of my career are mirrored in this analysis of those held in the not-for-profit sector in Australia today (ACOSS, 2011). No doubt each of you will hold other values inherent in the work of our sector that serve as a guiding light in the work that you do.

The challenges we face in maintaining our values

In this country, in this century, we are also facing a challenging – though hardly comparable - environment in which to address social disadvantage. In our society, social political and economic dimensions intersect to entrench inequality, evident for example in:

- The increase in the proportion of Australians living in poverty from less than 8% in 1994 to over 11% by 2006 (NCOSS, 2010)
- The particular and all-pervading disadvantage in indigenous communities
- The restructuring of labour markets which has resulted in long-term unemployment for many – particularly unskilled workers, people of CALD backgrounds, people with disabilities and young and older workers.
- Significant shifts in demography, notably the retirement of the baby boomers and an increasing ageing population
- Strident voices of racism and populism that prevail in the political context
- An environmental crisis that we, and the world, have been slow to acknowledge and address – with very far reaching social and economic implications and which we have seen so graphically demonstrated across the globe in recent months.

(NCOSS, 2010; ACOSS 2009; ACOSS 2010)

The not-for-profit community sector also faces its own set of challenges:

▪ Relationships between government and the not-for-profit sector

- There has been a progressive shift in the relationship between government and the not-for-profit sector towards a funder/provider model. This mitigates against creativity, engenders a ‘them and us’ attitude and creates a lack of understanding about the respective roles. This challenges our capacity for far-sighted vision and our influence on social policy. In addition, the silo structure of various government departments means that the reporting

mechanisms are unnecessarily complex and regularly require duplication. Recent efforts to form a compact between the governments and not-for-profit sectors at both Federal and State levels have met with only limited results at best.

- **Regulation of the sector**

- The sector is hampered by a myriad of complex and cross-cutting regulatory requirements that requires excessive time to cut through the laws relating to incorporation, fundraising and taxation and their associated accountability regimes. For this reason there has been a call for a National Regulator, a one stop shop for the not-for-profit sector.

This complexity in the regulatory regime also has significant impacts for effective management and governance within organizations.

- **Competitive tendering and underfunded contracts**

- Competitive tendering has meant that often services undercut each other. Services are underfunded and the funding does not properly reflect the true costs of service delivery. Funding rarely covers infrastructure costs including rent, training, IT and administration. As a result, some smaller services have disappeared (Abelló and MacDonald, 2002). In addition, community organisations have needed to become more strategic and focus on business decisions, such as profitability in the employment sector, as well their mission.

- **Data collection**

- Definitions used for data collection and reporting on programs are inconsistent and waste time and other resources. Again the different government departments have different reporting expectations which result in agencies requiring multiple data collection processes. In addition, the information flow is largely one way – feedback is rarely received from the funding body.

- **Performance monitoring**

- Performance monitoring is a vexed issue. Most performance monitoring processes look at monitoring service agreements and assess inputs and outputs, a tick-box approach, rather than outcomes. Organizations receive little information about their performance in relation to specific standards, nor concerning areas requiring improvement.

- **For profit organizations.**

- For profit organizations have a significant place in the community services sector, notably in child care, employment services and aged care. There are serious implications for the not-for-profit sector as we face competition from organizations that operate from a profit motive. For example. A recent article in the Financial Review (2nd March) has highlighted potential opportunities for the private sector from the proposed National disability Insurance Scheme.

- **Workforce**

- The not-for profit sector faces significant workforce challenges – including the relative pay inequities, as exemplified by the current wages case, the casualisation of the workforce; the ageing of the workforce and issue of appropriate training and qualifications.

- **Stifling of innovation**

- All of these factors weigh heavily on the sector and combine to stifle innovation and our capacity to formulate new approaches to emerging needs. There is very limited opportunity for organizations in the sector to imagine, create and experiment and to seek funding for issues not yet on the mainstream agenda and solutions outside the current focus of government. Our vision, independence and capacity for responsiveness are all compromised.

How do we maintain our ideals, survive and thrive in this context?

How then do we address pervasive disadvantage in our society and hold fast to our values as we simultaneously tackle challenges within our sector and remain effective and vibrant?

If only that question had an easy answer. This is the question that each one of us needs to address in our own minds and our own hearts, over the next two days and beyond. I cannot give prescriptive answers, but I can perhaps point towards what is possible.

I return to Apartheid South Africa, the crucible in which my thinking about values and a commitment to social justice was forged: I was working in the townships and saw daily the enormous deprivations faced by Black people. It was illegal for white people to be in the townships without a permit and I could not get a permit for what I was doing. I lived in an apartment in a beautiful area where black people were not allowed to live, unless they were servants. The tension I experienced in this land of conflict and contradiction was extreme. I was afraid to act and I was compelled to act.

My home overlooked the ocean. From my verandah I could see Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was detained, in the distance. Here was a man who knew what it meant to live from his core principles, at almost any cost. His inspiring statement from the dock before his imprisonment after the infamous Treason Trial speaks to that:

'During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.'

I did not share Mandela's measure of courage, but he did shine a light on what was possible. During my education at the University of the Witwatersrand, only white students were permitted to study. My quality education offered a very thorough grounding in community development practice. The very few black students who were able to negotiate their way through the mountains of obstacles – legal, political, social,

emotional and financial – that inhibited their opportunity for learning had to study at the University of Fort Hare where it was forbidden for them to learn about community development. One of the strategies I employed was to educate Black social workers in community development processes. In turn, they were able to work with the Xhosa speaking members of their communities – most of whom were illiterate – and inspire them to organize and work together to define and achieve their goals. Eventually, we were able to bring all the local groups together under the leadership of an umbrella body so they could expand the vision of what was possible for them to achieve in their community. One of the cherished memories I have of that time is the shining face of the chairman as he watched the different groups interacting, planning, negotiating...for an instant the full weight of the oppression he experienced as a Black man in a racially divided country lifted. He smiled at me and said: 'Renée, this is wonderful. We have so much to do!'

We cannot all emulate Nelson Mandela. We can only do what is possible within our sphere of influence. That is our responsibility. To quote the wonderful lines from Leonard Cohen:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack,
A crack in everything -
that's how the light gets in.*

The values that Mandela lived with such consummate skill – courage, dignity, patience, humour, strength, fairness and forgiveness – are not new. He was, however, a leader who had the capacity to employ them with complete integrity, finesse and consistency. Following in the footsteps of Ghandi, he knew the end is inherent in the means. Our challenge is to live them too, and to apply them effectively in all our activities and negotiations, understanding that we are answerable to those most disadvantaged, most marginalized in our society. We must ask ourselves: How can we unite the strengths inherent in our sector with the finest of these personal values? Where are the cracks between the challenges through which we can pour light? For it is our values and principles – consistently applied – that will enable us to meet the challenges we face...we must never lose sight of who we are and what we stand for.

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