

Looking Back, Looking Forward: Challenges faced by ANZTSR and the third sector

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Abstract

The third sector in Australasia faces some serious challenges as it tries to deal with the fallout from climate change and from a neoliberal economic and political environment, with its increasing inequality and injustice. Within that context, Australian and New Zealand Third Sector Research Inc. (ANZTSR) plays a potentially crucial role in researching, documenting and advocating for more positive solutions. However, it is also subject to the danger of being co-opted within the prevailing economic/political hegemony. This paper therefore examines the current state of the third sector and the achievements of ANZTSR, and identifies some of the key challenges that third sector researchers must address if the organisation is to be a useful force into the future.

Keywords

Third sector; *Third Sector Review*; not-for-profit sector; ANZTSR.

Introduction

The third sector in Australasia has achieved much, but it also faces some serious challenges resulting from the current neoliberal regime which dominates both government and the economy. This paper begins

with a review of the structure and shape of the sector in Australia and New Zealand, discussing indications of its growing importance in both countries. It goes on to briefly sketch out the development of Australian and New Zealand Third Sector Research Inc. (ANZTSR) and its journal, *Third Sector Review*. Turning then to the present, the paper reviews some of the key challenges faced by civil society and the third sector. This leads to a discussion of future directions, and a re-evaluation of the ANZTSR research agenda that may lead to more positive outcomes.

The structure and shape of the third sector

While the statistical documentation of the third sector in both Australia and New Zealand has been sometimes sketchy and remains incomplete, nonetheless the evidence is overwhelming. The sector in both countries is large and growing, both in size and in recognised importance. This was documented in a 2017 monograph by Jenny Onyx and Garth Nowland-Foreman, *A Review of Third Sector Research in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand: 1990–2016*, published in the series *Voluntaristics Review* by Brill Publishing.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2012/13 the non-profit sector contributed an estimated A\$55 billion to the Australian economy, representing 3.8 per cent of the economy-wide gross value added (ABS, 2014). The ABS data also indicates that the sector employed approximately 1,081,900 people. Charity sector reports, commencing with a report by Knight & Gilchrist (2014) and continuing through to ACNC (2019), suggest that the actual contribution may be significantly more than the ABS estimates.

In New Zealand the picture is much the same. In 2012/13 the non-profit sector contributed an estimated NZ\$6 billion to the New Zealand economy, representing 2.7 per cent of gross domestic product (Stats NZ 2016). The Non-profit Institutions Satellite Account also identified 114,110 non-profits, employing 136,750 paid staff.

Despite these impressive statistics, we don't know exactly how many third sector organisations there are – perhaps more than 600,000. There has been no census of the many small, unincorporated, self-resourced

organisations, and little attempt to identify or understand their role in local communities. Nevertheless, estimates in both countries suggest that 90 per cent of all third sector organisations are made up entirely of volunteers. In both countries the sector is pyramid-shaped, with a small number of very large organisations and a large number of very small organisations. A great deal is known about the small number of very large organisations, but very little about the hundreds of thousands of small organisations. Yet it is likely that these small, self-resourced organisations play an important role in the life of civil societies in Australia and New Zealand (McGregor-Lowndes 2014).

The third sector has a significant role to play in a number of service fields, notably community (social) service, health, education, the environment, arts and sport, as well as advocacy and policy development, to name a few.

Until recently, Australia had no central regulator within government to deal with the sector. This changed with the establishment of the national regulator in 2013, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, or ACNC. This office was intended to be a single destination for regulation and reporting, ultimately replacing all individual state jurisdictions. The newly formed ACNC had three objectives:

- to enhance public trust and confidence in the sector;
- to support the sector's independence and innovation; and
- to reduce unnecessary regulatory obligations (ACNC 2013: 14).

Despite some political resistance, this organisation is proving a powerful and important point of reference for non-profits across Australia. It has enabled cooperation across states on such matters as incorporation, duplicative record filing, streamlined contracting, and fundraising reform, as well as offering a formal means of dealing with abusive charity behaviour (McGregor-Lowndes 2016). Also, as noted by McGregor-Lowndes (2016: 40), the ACNC website provides:

. . . a number of well-considered legal precedents and guides. This includes model constitutions for unincorporated associations, companies

limited by guarantee, model charitable purposes as well as templates for common legal documents such as annual meetings (McGregor-Lowndes 2016: 40).

With the formation of the ACNC came the national *Charities Act 2013* (Cth). The *Charities Act* moved beyond case law to establish a unified definition of charities at the federal level, and confirmed that the intent or purpose of the organisation was more significant than the means of obtaining funds (e.g. through social enterprise). There was also some recognition of Indigenous issues and of political advocacy within the broad remit of charitable organisations (McGregor-Lowndes 2016).

In New Zealand, an independent Charities Commission was established in 2005 to regulate the roughly 23 per cent of non-profits that are registered charities in New Zealand. The Charities Commission was subsequently downgraded and transferred to a section within the Department of Internal Affairs. Its website now provides 'live' statistics on the 27,800 charities by region and by subsector, over time (since 2012).

In New Zealand, the Tangata Whenua Community and Voluntary Sector Research Centre was established by leaders in the sector in 2008, to promote better access to research for Indigenous community organisations and non-profits (Onyx & Nowland-Foreman 2017). It is noteworthy that no such peak research organisation has emerged for Indigenous communities in Australia, though several have emerged within individual universities and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies also plays a role.

ANZTSR and *Third Sector Review*

ANZTSR has been extremely important both in developing a national awareness of the third sector and its importance and also in developing a knowledge base that is unique to this sector and this context. The third sector in Australia and New Zealand is quite different in nature from either the government or the private business sector. Third sector organisations have different issues and impacts, and therefore different ways of operating from government agencies or from business, despite

some superficial similarities. Third sector organisations are also quite different from the third sector in the United States or Europe, and sometimes different from each other. It is therefore important to develop a uniquely Australasian knowledge base while also assessing and drawing on the knowledge developed elsewhere.

ANZTSR was formed in 1992. The organisation was established at the first Australian national conference for third sector research, held in 1992 at University Technology Sydney, with Professor Mark Lyons as the initial chair. *Third Sector Review* was launched in 1995, with Professor Jenny Onyx as founding editor. An overview of the contents of that journal provides a glimpse of the research issues of concern to the third sector in the region, both for researchers and for practitioners.

Initially, *Third Sector Review* produced a single issue per volume each year. This was expanded to two issues per volume as more quality articles were submitted. Initially, all peer-reviewed articles were written by Australian academics. Gradually some New Zealand articles appeared, particularly after several of the biennial ANZTSR conferences were held in New Zealand. By 2016 there was a strong New Zealand presence in the journal, including scholars taking editorial roles.

ANZTSR has held a third sector research conference every two years, with two successive conferences held at Australian universities followed by one in New Zealand. Those presenting papers have been encouraged to develop their conference papers for submission to *Third Sector Review*. For each conference, one issue in the following year was at least partly reserved for those peer-reviewed conference papers. Submissions were encouraged from academics and practitioners alike; many issues included a 'From the Field' section of more direct relevance to practitioners. These were also peer-reviewed but within a policy of peer support and development.

From an analysis of content topics over the 22-year period from 1995–2016 (Onyx & Nowland-Foreman 2017), it appears that the sector has been preoccupied with relations with government. This is not surprising given the dependence of most organisations on government funding, and the political upheavals and consequent changes in government policy during this period. Similarly, there was a great deal of focus on

the internal governance of third sector organisations, as various articles explored both the governance demands of the state but also the need for strategic planning within governance structures more appropriate to the third sector. Much if not all of this preoccupation concerned the larger formal (incorporated) non-profit agencies, rather than the many unincorporated community organisations. However, throughout the period there was a continuing interest in exploring the theory of the sector as a whole.

More recently, articles began to emerge that explored relations with the corporate sector, and the possibility of creating hybrid forms of third sector organisations, particularly social enterprises that may be at least partly self-funding through the sale of goods and services, while maintaining a broader social mission.

Some surprising gaps also exist. While there has been a moderate and continuing interest in the internal backroom tasks of accounting and finance, there has been relatively little interest in exploring the conditions of employment of the workforce, despite the fact that these are known to be inadequate, with a preponderance of highly qualified staff who receive relatively low pay and are subject to casual employment conditions, and evidence of high turnover in some areas. Similarly, there has been relatively little interest in the issue of philanthropy, or indeed in volunteering. Finally, there has been relatively little interest in grassroots community engagement or activism beyond an interest in broader social capital and the social impact of an organisation on the community in question. The impression is one of research and theory devoted to developing an effective third sector system of service provision within the prevailing broader state hegemony.

Some 25 years since *Third Sector Review* was established, there have been ten special issues, roughly one every two years. These special issues are a useful indicator of key areas of concern for third sector research in Australasia, either to highlight major hubs of current interest or, more frequently, to stimulate interest in an under-researched area. Indeed, the first special issue, in 1998, was the report of a research symposium organised by Mark Lyons and held in Melbourne, which was designed to stimulate Australian interest in third sector research. This symposium

brought key international scholars together with senior Australian researchers. Later special issues explored areas that had previously been overlooked or under-represented within a distinctive third sector space. These included the role of the third sector in sport, and Australian third sector environmentalism. In other cases, specialist areas within the third sector were explored, such as charity law, communication, and cooperatives and the social economy. Finally, some special issues were devoted to important current issues and debates, such as the third sector as a voice for civil society, social enterprise and volunteerism. *Third Sector Review* is produced almost entirely on a volunteer basis. It is an essential source of information, theoretical understanding and broad discussion, and an extremely valuable resource that must be supported.

Challenges and issues

ANZTSR faces some serious challenges, which are not of its own making but which nonetheless seriously impact the way it operates, and indeed its very survival as a research organisation.

As I and others have documented recently (Onyx et al. 2017), we all operate within a neoliberal social, economic and political order, one that is increasingly destructive of civil society and that is deliberately creating greater individualism, competition and inequality. Those qualities are highly toxic to human wellbeing and community life. They are also highly toxic to the wellbeing of the planet; the effects of climate change are becoming more obvious.

At the broadest level, we are dealing with the consequences of ever-increasing inequality within society, as neoliberal reform of tax and welfare systems has resulted in less progressive tax systems and less generous social security systems, increasing the inequality of the distribution of post-tax income. Neoliberal reforms have also contributed to labour market inequality by rewarding managers with very high salaries, while removing interventions that protected the interests of lower-skilled workers, thus reducing their wages. More generally, the weakening of unions and awards has affected lower-skilled workers more severely than higher-skilled workers (Quiggin 1999). Economic

inequality has reached such proportions that, according to a recent Oxfam report, since 2015 the world's richest 1 per cent of people have owned more wealth than the rest of the planet. Eight men now own the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the world (Oxfam 2017: 2).

The consequences are not simply about income inequality. Standing (2011) talks of 'the precariat', an emerging class of people in all OECD countries who have good education and skills, but who are now considered redundant and are increasingly being forced into short-term, part-time or contract work, putting them in a precarious social and economic position. This can affect anyone, but it is particularly harsh on the young, as they try to establish their careers and homes, and on those aged over 50, who find it increasingly difficult to find employment once made redundant. As social and economic inequality increases, so do the social and economic disruptions that follow.

The effect of these neoliberal reforms flows on to the way organisations are funded, structured, managed and controlled. Increasingly, third sector organisations are designed and operated to suit the agenda of powerful political and business interests, not the people they purport to serve. Large and powerful third sector organisations have evolved to operate as agents of the state, with hierarchical bureaucracies to match (Onyx, Cham & Dalton 2016). The sector is rapidly developing as an efficient service delivery arm of the state (Productivity Commission 2010). However, small, local, community-based organisations find it increasingly difficult to obtain funding, and often are forced to operate as subcontractors to the large charities. There is a constant danger of mission drift, being unable to operate independently of government policy.

Of particular concern is the reduced capacity of third sector organisations to maintain an advocacy role – that is, to be able to critique government policy and call government and business to account. Advocacy is a crucial part of what the third sector is about. Regardless, neoliberal governments do not like it that organisations may criticise policy while at the same time receiving government funding. They may be seen as 'special interest' organisations, no different from other special interests seeking favourable government intervention. Advocacy

has become more sophisticated as a result, but more muted. Activism is curtailed by the need to survive. (Onyx et al. 2010).

These broader trends also directly or indirectly affect the way universities are structured and function, particularly as they struggle to maintain financial viability and competitive advantage. In the process, third sector research is squeezed out.

Part of the problem lies with the disciplinary structure of universities. The traditional silo disciplines continue to dominate and resist incursions from other fields (Aldrich 2014). This is despite an increasing realisation that real-world problems cut across all disciplines, and can only be meaningfully resolved through cross-disciplinary and indeed transdisciplinary understanding and action (Smith 2013; Zahir 2018). So increasingly universities have large research teams that include experts from various disciplines. But each of those experts must publish within their own disciplinary journals, using a specific language and format which may be largely inaccessible to others (Rhoten 2004).

Third sector research has always been explicitly cross-disciplinary. Third sector journals aim to bring the knowledge and methods of many disciplines to bear on the field of civil society – particularly on how and why things are different from the taken-for-granted-ness of business and from government. But this virtue has also been a major handicap. The third sector does not relate to powerful government or business interests, and therefore does not normally attract major funding. It is not recognised as a discipline. While it is deliberately inclusive, it is excluded from the normal bureaucratic and funding processes of the major disciplines. Third sector scholars are located within their home disciplines, and early researchers are required to attend the conferences and publish in the journals of these disciplines if they wish to secure promotion. Many continue to live a kind of double academic life, but it is becoming more difficult to do so. Many key research and teaching programs have been discontinued as they fall from favour in the academic scramble for disciplinary funding. This essentially leaves Australasia without effective academic centres or research programs that specialise in the non-profit sector. This situation must be reversed.

The problem then flows on to ANZTSR, the formal national (with New Zealand) research organisation for the third sector. ANZTSR is valued, and is important. But the organisation has struggled to maintain the necessary infrastructure to maintain and grow such a nationwide research institution for Australia and New Zealand. It has no external funding, and relies on what little income flows from its biennial conferences, from membership fees and from publication returns. Each conference relies on the goodwill of the host university and the volunteer contributions of many scholars. It is difficult even to maintain a reliable member database. There are few resources for any marketing, and many scholars are barely aware of the organisation's existence.

Why is this so? The evidence is clear that ANZTSR has a crucial role to play in facilitating the conduct and dissemination of research. Society is struggling in many ways, and needs the support of its civil society. Third sector organisations are able to achieve much when governments and businesses fail. But quality research is essential to better understand how civil society organisations work (or why they don't), how to understand and measure their wider impact, and how to facilitate broader citizen engagement with them.

ANZTSR also has an ongoing problem in communicating with its practitioner base. The organisation has always urged the participation of practitioners in its conferences and in *Third Sector Review*. Indeed, there is a wider push for academic/community scholarship such as that in *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research*. *Gateways* is a refereed journal concerned with the practice and processes of university/community engagement. It provides a forum for academics and practitioners. However, there has been little success for ANZTSR in encouraging real community/academic publication. Practitioners generally regard academic research as esoteric, difficult to access and sometimes irrelevant to their concerns. Yet they bring a far greater degree of contextualised knowledge than those in academia can ever obtain. There are many forms of knowledge and forms of communicating that academics ignore. Such a situation is not good for the continued relevance of ANZTSR.

Potential new directions

It is important to consider potential responses to these challenges, and ways in which ANZTSR might move forward. It is of course possible to simply accept the status quo, to do nothing. But that takes the soul out of the third sector. And that is not what is always happening. The danger appears greatest to those organisations closest to government, who have become largely ‘agents of the state’. But there is also resistance: there are emerging new ways of operating, new forms of activism, especially (but not only) by the young. There are hundreds, thousands of new organisations forming, with or without formal incorporation, with or without government funding. These are the voices of the people, citizens coming together to make a difference, as they have always done to meet a perceived gap in services or to create a better world. Many use online tools and social media to great effect. Many remain small and local to meet a local need. There are others who ‘think global but act local’, like the many local climate action groups (Power 2012). Most adopt an open democratic structure with the involvement of all members, where individual citizens have a voice: they cooperate rather than compete, and together create new actions, new services and strong political advocacy.

That is what is happening within third sector organisations. But academic researchers rarely study these internal processes, or at least rarely publish about them. Third sector journals are full of technical papers on issues of funding, relations with government, accountability and governance. Many academics seem blind to the emerging resistance, perhaps because their own research funding is controlled by the demands of the neoliberal regime, even as they criticise it. This situation requires a partial shift in the research agenda.

Theory-building is also a crucial aspect of third sector research, and there is nothing as practical as a good theory – one that provides better metaphors and conceptual models to work with. One such is complexity theory (Cilliers 2005; Goldstein & Hazy 2006). This is a kind of meta-methodological approach which leads to very different lines of inquiry. The fundamental tenet of complexity theory is that all things

and actions are connected and constantly emergent in time. Causality is not linear; it's about the combination and interaction of all elements present co-creating what is happening. The focus is on emergence: the constant creation of the new out of the interaction of all the present elements, including human intention and action. Agency is never an individual act but an intersubjective process, a collective process of interaction with others (present and imagined). The outcome can never be fully predicted or knowable. But it has shape. It is meaningful. It is self-organising. Humans collectively self-organise themselves into new networks, new actions and new organisations. We humans are constantly co-creating ourselves, forming new understandings, determining new paths of actions to solve the problems as understood (Onyx & Leonard 2011). This is best done in open-ended collaborative inquiry groups, not within a bureaucratic, hierarchical structure of command and control. Even within the most highly controlled structure, the real action is nonetheless outside the control and knowledge of any individual authority.

These ideas of complexity, emergence, uncertainty and co-creation are new and difficult concepts. They require a different conception of causality, collective and transdisciplinary enquiry. No single discipline has the capacity to understand what is happening, but all can contribute. Above all, for third sector researchers and practitioners alike, what's important is to listen to the voices of the people as all together co-create the future. It means focusing on collaborative action, not individualistic, competitive self-interest. It means regarding people not as clients but as citizens and co-creators.

Research centres and research organisations are crucial to support and extend this knowledge. There need to be such centres at the local university level, but also strong national and international third sector/civil society organisations. ANZTSR has already necessarily moved across multiple disciplines: management, political studies, psychology, sociology, economics and law, to name a few. Third sector research gains its strength from this multi-disciplinary perspective. As in other parts of the world, that also makes this field very vulnerable.

The growth of knowledge also depends on a vibrant international research environment. From the beginning, third sector researchers in Australia took a central role in the establishment of ISTR, the International Society for Third-Sector Research. Those in ANZTSR have continued to be active participants in the Asia-Pacific regional conferences of ISTR, as well as attending the American ARNOVA conferences. They have all contributed regularly, not only to *Third Sector Review*, but also to all the major international journals in the sector, such as *Voluntas* and *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*. Australian and New Zealand scholars have regularly collaborated with colleagues in many parts of the globe, as witnessed by recent publications coming out of experiences at ISTR conferences. One is an anthology of global feminist civil society organisations, which came directly out of a project initiated by the women's special interest group at ISTR, with editors from the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and Japan, and contributions from some fifteen countries (Schwabensland et al. 2016). That was a critical assessment of women's organisations' capacity for the emancipation of women throughout the globe. There are many other examples of contributions made by Australian and New Zealand authors to international collaborations. They have both contributed to and learned from this experience, and found ways of translating that knowledge to the uniquely Australasian context.

Conclusions

It is important to measure, support and create local and trans-local networks and alliances. The future requires new ways of thinking and acting, including new models of public funding that enhance, not diminish, the capacity of the third sector. Current neoliberal 'business as usual' is not sustainable, and indeed major social change and a shift in cultural values must occur if we are to move into a better future. But there are potential solutions. These solutions must begin, at least in part, with the actions of civil society, and therefore with the actions of researchers and practitioners in the third sector.

Much of our published research documents, analyses and supports the development of the sector as an effective service delivery partner to government. There is nothing wrong with maintaining efficient service delivery for those in need, or with working in partnership with government to do so. But if that is all the sector does, and all it is allowed to do, then I think the sector has failed in its mission.

It is vital that ANZTSR revisits its research agenda, and provides more attention to that part of the sector that is made up of the thousands of small, local organisations, which have been relatively less researched. Much might be learned from such a research program. Third sector researchers are constrained, like others, by the demands of a neoliberal ideological regime, and by the resource constraints that go with it. But, as a consequence, we have largely ignored the hundreds of thousands of small, locally based community development organisations – they exist in every community, and help to provide the social capital which brings people together to help each other, to share information and to create new pathways to solve local problems.

These small organisations may or may not be incorporated. They may be entirely self-resourced. They may be a nuisance to the powers that be, especially when they object to externally imposed changes that may harm their local community. But these organisations are the first responders when a calamity occurs. These are the ones that provide Neighbourhood Watch and look out for the sick, the elderly and the socially isolated. These are the ones that bind the community and the wider society together. They are the ones that make the local community a good place to live. We should know more about how these organisations form, what resources they muster, what impact they have, and how they come to be destroyed by larger market or state forces, or by their own internal conflicts. We should know more about how they resist such forces. These things can be measured, but not in the first instance by money. We need to measure social capital as it intersects with physical, environmental, political and human capital, as well as considering the financial implications.

ANZTSR should also value and support advocacy organisations. Advocacy organisations are often the only ones, together with the

independent press, that can monitor state and market actions and policy directions, and call state and market leaders to account when they endanger public institutions, when they pursue private interests at the expense of the public good, and when they survive on 'fake news'. Civil society, with the third sector as its infrastructure, has the capacity to change society for the better, to create new solutions to old, wicked problems, to fight for social justice and greater inclusiveness, and to reverse human destruction of the planet. But that can only happen if the sector maintains a separation from both state and market, a capacity to be self-governing and a willingness to speak truth.

And, especially, ANZTSR and third sector researchers and activists need to value and support those working to save the planet. Civil society organisations need to form alliances locally, nationally and internationally to mobilise efforts to reverse the destructive effects of climate change and endless waste, to slow down the environmental destruction of forests and waterways, and to respect and honour the planet. These are the mammoth issues of our time. Civil society has a vital role in finding new solutions beyond the merely technical. Ultimately, it is only the work of citizens coming together that can enforce the necessary changes to the economic and political systems and return the environment to health. Third sector research has a vital role to play in understanding and documenting this process. We are more important than we have recognised.

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