

**'WHY CAN'T YOU JUST TELL THE MINISTER
WE'RE DOING A GOOD JOB?'**
**Managing Accountability in Community Service
Organisations**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	I
SUMMARY	V
DECLARATION	VII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VIII
GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS	IX
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
BACKGROUND	1
FOCUS OF RESEARCH	2
<i>Community service organisations (CSOs)</i>	3
WHY THIS RESEARCH IS NEEDED	9
<i>The importance of accountability</i>	10
<i>The impact of public sector reform on CSOs</i>	16
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT	20
SUMMARY	26
CHAPTER 2 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ACCOUNTABILITY?.....	27
NARROW OR 'CORE' DEFINITIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY	31
BROADER MEANINGS	32
SECTION SUMMARY	37
MODELS OF ACCOUNTABILITY	38
<i>The value of models</i>	38
<i>Examples of models</i>	41
INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONAL (INGO) PERSPECTIVES	47
SECTION SUMMARY	52
CHAPTER 3 PUBLIC SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY	55
WESTMINSTER NOTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR	55
PUBLIC SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY MODELS	57
<i>Accountability typologies</i>	57
<i>Mechanisms of accountability</i>	64
THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM	67
<i>Increased accountability?</i>	71
<i>Weakened accountability?</i>	73
<i>Or just different accountability?</i>	74
REFORM IMPLEMENTATION DIFFICULTIES	76
SECTION SUMMARY	81
RESPONSES TO CHANGES IN ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIREMENTS	82
CHAPTER 4 A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT	85
CONCEPTUAL MODELS	90
INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM	94
CSO FUNDING	96
IMPACT AND INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC SECTOR REFORMS	99
<i>Agency autonomy</i>	101
<i>Power</i>	103
<i>Trust</i>	105
<i>Organisational capacity</i>	106
<i>Service quality</i>	106
<i>Volunteers and staff</i>	107
<i>Impact on rural and regional areas</i>	108
<i>Costs</i>	108
<i>Sector changes</i>	110

<i>Interagency relationships</i>	110
<i>Responses</i>	112
SUMMARY.....	115
CHAPTER 5 THE LANGUAGE OF PARTNERSHIP	116
PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION.....	117
CSO PARTNERSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT.....	120
<i>Formalising relationships</i>	122
<i>The Australian experience of partnership</i>	123
<i>Partnership within a contractual relationship</i>	132
CSO PARTNERSHIPS WITH BUSINESS.....	136
CSO PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER AGENCIES.....	137
ACCOUNTABILITY AND PARTNERSHIP.....	139
<i>Shared accountability</i>	141
SUMMARY.....	145
CHAPTER 6 EXPLORING THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN STORY	147
METHODOLOGY.....	147
METHOD.....	149
<i>Interviews</i>	149
<i>Subject selection</i>	151
<i>Document review</i>	156
<i>Role of the researcher</i>	156
<i>Data analysis</i>	157
<i>Coding framework</i>	158
<i>Ethical issues</i>	158
CHAPTER 7 ACCOUNTABILITY IN COMMUNITY SERVICE ORGANISATIONS	160
CSO ACCOUNTABILITY RELATIONSHIPS.....	161
<i>Accountable to government funders</i>	162
<i>Accountable to service users</i>	167
<i>Accountable to the board</i>	169
<i>Accountable to staff</i>	172
<i>Accountable to volunteers</i>	173
<i>Accountable to mission/values</i>	173
<i>Accountable to the community</i>	174
<i>Accountable to the church</i>	175
<i>Accountable to other agencies</i>	177
<i>Accountable to donors</i>	178
A WEB OF ACCOUNTABILITY.....	181
<i>Source of accountability</i>	182
<i>Accountability mechanisms</i>	189
THE IMPACT OF THE INTRODUCTION OF PURCHASER-PROVIDER MODELS.....	198
<i>Reporting arrangements</i>	204
<i>Impact on role and activity</i>	206
<i>Impact on agency culture</i>	208
<i>Impact on relationships with other CSOs</i>	209
<i>Impact on relationships with government funders</i>	210
A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER, A CHANGE FOR THE WORSE.....	214
<i>Trust</i>	216
<i>Resources</i>	217
<i>Service quality</i>	218
<i>Structure</i>	219
<i>Governance</i>	220
<i>Accountability relationship with government</i>	221
IS THE COMMUNITY SECTOR LESS ACCOUNTABLE THAN OTHERS?	223
<i>A lack of external mechanisms, or a lack of activity by those that do exist?</i>	225
<i>Lack of a clear 'bottom line'</i>	227
<i>Lack of scrutiny of individuals within organisations</i>	227
<i>Limited internal monitoring and fewer mechanisms for redress</i>	228

CHAPTER 8 AN ERA OF PARTNERSHIP?	235
CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS	237
<i>Relationship with the State Government</i>	237
<i>Social Inclusion Initiative</i>	244
<i>Relationship with the Commonwealth Government</i>	248
<i>Relationship with other CSOs</i>	255
<i>Attitudes to partnership</i>	257
<i>Implementation issues</i>	259
<i>Relationship with private sector/business</i>	263
<i>Other relationships</i>	264
IMPACT ON ACCOUNTABILITY	264
<i>Quality and accountability – The Service Excellence Framework (SEF)</i>	267
<i>Transparency</i>	277
<i>Conflicting accountability</i>	281
DISCUSSION	283
SUMMARY	288
CHAPTER 9 MANAGING ACCOUNTABILITY – A WAY FORWARD?	290
PUBLIC SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY	292
COMMUNITY SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY	300
ORGANISATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SECTOR	304
FUTURE DIRECTIONS	311
CONCLUSION	320
APPENDIX 1 LETTER OF INTRODUCTION	323
APPENDIX 2 CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW	324
APPENDIX 3 INTERVIEW FRAMEWORKS – FIRST SERIES	326
APPENDIX 4 SUMMARY PROVIDED PRIOR TO SECOND INTERVIEWS	329
APPENDIX 5 INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK – SECOND SERIES	333
BIBLIOGRAPHY	334

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURE 1: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TYPES OF ORGANISATIONS	8
FIGURE 2: TWO VIEWS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY	30
FIGURE 3: KEARNS' 1994 MODEL OF ACCOUNTABILITY	44
FIGURE 4: THE ACCOUNTABILITY CUBE	46
FIGURE 5: INGO ACCOUNTABILITY	48
FIGURE 6: NGO ACCOUNTABILITY	51
FIGURE 7: TYPES OF PUBLIC SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY	58
FIGURE 8: STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES FOR ACCOUNTABILITY	61
FIGURE 9: STEWART'S (1984) LADDER OF ACCOUNTABILITY	62
FIGURE 10: LINKAGES BETWEEN VALUES AND ACCOUNTABILITY INSTITUTIONS	64
FIGURE 11: PUBLIC SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS	64
FIGURE 12: AREAS OF ACCOUNTABILITY	65
FIGURE 13: MODEL OF GOVERNMENT-NGO RELATIONSHIPS	91

FIGURE 14: THE FOUR-CS OF NGO-GOVERNMENT RELATIONS.....	91
FIGURE 15: MIXES OF MODES OF NON-PROFIT-GOVERNMENT RELATIONS	93
FIGURE 16: LEVELS OF INFLUENCE UNDER DIFFERENT FUNDING MODELS	97
FIGURE 17: KETTNER AND MARTIN'S PARTNERSHIP AND MARKET CONTRACTING MODELS ..	132
FIGURE 18: CSO ACCOUNTABILITY 'MAP'	181
FIGURE 19: PROPOSED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FUNDERS AND CSOS	222
TABLE 1: ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS 1995/1996.....	8
TABLE 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF NARROW VS. BROAD UNDERSTANDINGS OF ACCOUNTABILITY	37
TABLE 3: MODELS OF NON-PROFIT ACCOUNTABILITY	53
TABLE 4: PREDICTORS OF INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM	95
TABLE 5: CONTRACTS OR GRANTS?.....	98
TABLE 6: DIFFERENT FORMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY RELATIONSHIP	142
TABLE 7: SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWEES.....	153
TABLE 8: WHO CSO MANAGERS (2000/2001) SEE THEMSELVES AS ACCOUNTABLE TO.....	163
TABLE 9: BASIS OF ACCOUNTABILITY TO DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS	195
TABLE 10: ACCOUNTABILITY: A COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK.....	224
TABLE 11: ACCOUNTABILITY UNDER DIFFERENT MODELS OF FUNDING	298

SUMMARY

Community service organisations play a crucial role in the delivery of many social services while functioning from a strong values base often associated with a particular religion. They attempt to respond to the needs of multiple stakeholders. This creates a complex and sometimes ambiguous set of accountability relationships.

Government contributes significantly to the funding of most community service organisations, and often this is reflected in close working relationships between public servants in funding departments and managers of community service organisations. The nature of this relationship was changed as a consequence of a wave of public sector reforms beginning in the 1980s. These reforms aimed to increase the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of government departments. Strategies adopted included funder-purchaser-provider models of service delivery, leading to the contracting out of some services previously provided by government and the adoption of more contract-like agreements with existing external service providers. This led to the development of additional mechanisms for measuring and monitoring performance. These were directed both internally towards public sector staff and externally to funded programs.

The community services sector's concern about the impact of reform on their functioning and survival provided the impetus for undertaking this qualitative study of the management of accountability in community service organisations in South Australia. Data were collected in 2000-2001 through interviews with community service organisation and public service staff, and through analysis of organisational documents related to accountability. Staff from twelve community service

organisations, and state and federal public servants participated. While the analysis shows the costs to community service organisations and the damage to their relationship with government resulting from reform, it also identifies improvements to the management of accountability in some organisations.

Governments at both state and federal levels have since adopted the language of partnership and collaboration. This occurred partly in recognition of the negative impacts of an over-zealous emphasis on distanced purchaser-provider relationships and partly from an increasing recognition of the failure of existing systems to resolve complex social issues.

Follow-up data were collected in 2004 that identified changes in the relationships between the community service organisations and funding departments, and in the community service organisations' management of their own accountability. Analysis of these data found a significance increase in formal relationships between community service organisations but limited change in the relationship with government.

Through an analysis of the impact of public sector change on community service organisations in South Australia, this thesis contributes to the understanding of inter-sectoral relationships and the management of accountability in community service organisations.