RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Looking for Sustainability in Not-for-Profit Program Delivery: An Experiment in Providing Post-Bushfire Recovery Programs

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This article examines an experiment in delivering services and programs in communities that were affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Three not-for-profit agencies received funding to develop and deliver programs over a period of three years with the aim of achieving sustainability for the programs thus created. They were not constrained by the requirements of normal government funding, which is short term, subject to competitive tendering and targeted at specific programs and client groups. The nature of the funding allowed the three agencies to introduce innovative programs tailored to the needs of the community and with the aim of building community capacity. However the question of whether the programs are sustainable when existing funding runs out remains open.

Key words: not-for-profit service providers, bushfire recovery programs, new public management

Since the 1980s the introduction of new public management, neo-liberalism or economic rationalism has resulted in major changes in the way in which social welfare services are delivered in Australia and elsewhere (Boston 1995; Butcher and Freyens 2011; Mendes 2008). The not-for-profit sector has become accustomed to a new regime of government funding in which services are increasingly contracted out to the private or not-for-profit sector. Governments have introduced purchaser-provider agreements with agencies delivering health and welfare services (Hess 2003; Baulderstone 2008). They decide on a program, advertise for providers and select one or more on a competitive basis. Providers that win contracts deliver a strictly defined range of services for strictly defined groups of clients. Reporting and accountability requirements are inflexible and funding is short-term. The Kennett government elected in Victoria in 1992 with a robust neo-liberal agenda was an early adopter of contracting out services, resulting in what some observers described as ‘the contract state’ (Alford and O’Neill 1994).

The consequences of this can be considerable for service providers, their employees and their clients. Church-related not-for-profit organisations deliver approximately half of welfare, labour market, health and education services in Australia. Much of this delivery is through contracting arrangements with governments. Significant economic and managerial issues have arisen for both governments and the organisations delivering the services, especially regarding the sustainability of the arrangements (Swain 2009; Productivity Commission 2009).

Research into not-for-profit organisations has identified a variety of negative consequences related to the sustainability of various programs and the costs involved in preparing applications which may not be successful. Managers spend a substantial amount of their time applying for grants and reporting (Flack and Ryan 2005). Organisations have to change their structures and practices to adjust
to the demands of government funders (Spall and Zetlin 2004). Frontline staff have less time to spend with clients because of unrealistic output targets and/or because the provider devotes its time and resources to developing the next competitive tender (Considine 2003; Webber and Bessant 2001). Staff and management are often unhappy about the dissonance between the organisation’s values and government policy (Rogers 2007). Not-for-profit boards must make decisions about whether to lay-off staff or be involved in service delivery of programs which may not be a close match with the values of the organisation. Successful programs cease because there is no more funding or because funding has been transferred elsewhere. Conversely, because allocated funding has not been fully expended, a program continues when it is no longer appropriate or not a high priority for organisations. This is well summed up by a wry observation made to us in the course of this research that there was a week when the drought program workers couldn’t get through the floods to visit clients. There are also consequences for staff, whose employment is inevitably short-term and precarious. They tend to be employed on short-term contracts with no promise or certainty of renewal.

In recent years there has been considerable research on how not-for-profit organisations have engaged with government when they are contracted to deliver government programs (Considine 2003; Domberger and Hall 1996; Flack and Ryan 2005; Butcher 2006; McGregor-Lowndes and Ryan 2009; Spall and Zetlin 2004; Rogers 2007). Some commentators, in Australia and elsewhere, have suggested that not-for-profit organisations will need to re-examine their own structures in the light of possible conflict between their obligations to funders and their mission (McCluskey 2002; Rogers 2007). Considine (2003), Rogers (2007) and Considine, Lewis and O’Sullivan (2011) all used the example of the Job Network, initiated by the Commonwealth government in the 1990s, to examine the impact of contracting out on not-for-profit organisations. Considine (2003) concluded that, as a result of the competition amongst providers, not-for-profits moved their focus to ‘the needs of employers and to the administrative demands of the government purchasing authority’ (Considine 2003:75), and thus became very similar to other service providers in the Job Network. Rogers (2007) focussed particularly on church-based organisations and concluded that they may need to adapt in order to maintain their own principles and missions. The rhetoric associated with contracting out services suggested that the services would be more efficient, innovative and flexible when delivered by the market. Considine, Lewis and O’Sullivan (2011) also studied the Job Network with a 2008 survey of frontline staff and concluded that, contrary to such aspirations, contracting out reduced both flexibility and innovation.

Lyons’ (2001) work on the third sector has shown that churches have been important in the provision of social welfare services in Australia. However the relationship with and demands from government have been a long-standing concern for Catholic social welfare organisations concerned about the possibility of compromising their role and mission (Camilleri and Winkworth 2005:83–84). It is also possible that organisations run the risk of losing or reducing their advocacy role while simultaneously taking on contracts that may not be profitable because of high costs of tendering and the extent of the risks borne by the service provider once the tender has been won (Oslington 2002:19–32). Oslington suggested that church-based organisations need to consider their own position and ‘think carefully about whether they should continue to bid for government contracts’ (Oslington 2002:38).

The 2009 bushfires and the Archbishop’s Charitable Fund

The state of Victoria, in the south-east of Australia, is one of the country’s most fire-prone areas (Pyne 1998:50–52). In this region, in January and February 2009, 173 people died and numerous public and private buildings were destroyed by some of the worst bushfires in Australian history. Several small towns were almost completely obliterated. The initial relief and response efforts were coordinated by the state and local governments, activating their emergency
planning arrangements, but in the aftermath a large number of not-for-profit organisations began to offer recovery programs.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne established the Archbishop’s Charitable Fund Bushfire Appeal in February 2009. It collected nearly $4 million from the Catholic community of Australia. The Fund then invited a number of Catholic organisations, including the three in this study, to apply for funding to deliver recovery services to bushfire survivors. The overall project of funding some Catholic agencies to deliver recovery services was overseen by a steering committee chaired by Catholic Social Services Victoria. The Fund did not prescribe what programs should be delivered; instead applicants were invited to present their own submissions and arguments about what programs were appropriate. The only requirements were that submissions must align with the aims of the project, which were:

- To address gaps in immediate welfare needs;
- To meet community strengthening needs that are not currently being met, over the next 2–3 years;
- And, thereby, to develop a sustainable community development response that leaves the affected communities in better shape after the bushfire recovery than they were in prior to the fires (Fitzgerald 2009:1).

In this, the Archbishop’s Fund and the organisations it funded were operating a model of funding that was not based on a competitive and contract based system. While the project description stated that the aim of the recovery project was to leave communities in a ‘better shape’ than they were before the fires and that projects should be ‘sustainable’, these terms were not defined at the time. There was also no documentation about how this aim could be achieved. These definitional issues were not addressed until much later in the recovery process.

**The Research Project**

A three-year longitudinal study was conducted on responses to the 2009 Victorian bushfires by the three Catholic organisations that received funding from the Archbishop’s Charitable Fund Bushfire Appeal. One of the aims of the research project was to track, document and evaluate the Catholic bushfire recovery program in respect to sustainability and positive effect. This article outlines the roles that the three agencies adopted in trying to achieve this aim within a context of untied funding and independence from the formal tendering processes that normally occur in providing welfare and support services.

Three rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2011. Forty-five people (19 males and 26 females) were interviewed at least once, resulting in a total of 74 interviews. The interviewees came from a range of sectors including Catholic welfare organisations (29); state and local government (8); international recovery organisations (2). Others interviewed included parish, school, clergy, church and medical personnel (6). Advice and background information was sought from approximately twenty other informants including Victorian government employees and other Catholic and non-Catholic social welfare organisations. In addition, the research team attended meetings of the project steering committee and met with key people in the organisations for consultation about the direction of the research. Interviews were transcribed and analysed by the research team. The researchers sought information from managers and staff of other organisations about what other not-for-profit organisations and government bodies were already doing, where the gaps in services were occurring, and what were the challenges that organisations or government departments were facing in their endeavour to meet community needs.

**The Centacare Experiment – Funding For Objectives Not Programs**

Three of the organisations that successfully applied for funding from the Archbishop’s Fund were Centacare Gippsland, Centacare Melbourne (re-named CatholicCare in April 2010) and Centacare Sandhurst. They are all part
of the Catholic Church, each associated with either an Archdiocese (in the case of Melbourne) or a Diocese (respectively the Dioceses of Sandhurst and Sale in the cases of Centacare Sandhurst and Centacare Gippsland). As Catholic organisations, a commitment to Catholic social teachings underlies their work. They have all concentrated on providing programs and services to families, couples, individuals and communities.

Centacare Melbourne is part of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, which covers the major part of metropolitan Melbourne and some surrounding semi-rural areas. Melbourne has a population of approximately 3.5 million people. The 2009 bushfires occurred in semi-rural areas in the north of Melbourne, in some cases raising the fear that they would threaten outer northern suburbs of Melbourne such as Eltham and Warrandyte. Centacare Melbourne is a medium sized organisation with offices throughout Melbourne and Geelong and more than 200 employees. It has existed in various forms since 1935 when it was established as the Catholic Social Service Bureau. Its main function at that time was ‘to administer children’s admission to the over-crowded children’s homes in the Archdiocese’ (CatholicCare n.d.). Centacare Melbourne did not have a physical presence in the bushfire areas or nearby.

Centacare Sandhurst was established in the mid-1980s and Centacare Gippsland in 1998. Both are small compared to Centacare Melbourne, particularly Centacare Gippsland with fewer than ten staff. Centacare Sandhurst is part of the Diocese of Sandhurst, which covers a substantial area of central and northern Victoria, from the large urban centre of Bendigo (with a population of approximately 76,000) to the border with New South Wales. As well as its head office in Bendigo, it has sites in a number of smaller towns throughout Victoria. Like Centacare Sandhurst, Centacare Gippsland covers a large regional and rural area with low population density. It is part of the Diocese of Sale in the south-east of Victoria, running from the outskirts of Melbourne to the border with New South Wales. Gippsland itself is a large and diverse region that runs from the outer east of Melbourne to the coast. East Gippsland encompasses both rural and agricultural areas and the Latrobe Valley industrial area. West Gippsland, however, differs from both the East Gippsland sector covered by Centacare Gippsland and the Centacare Sandhurst area, in that it is on the eastern fringes of Melbourne and includes newer and rapidly expanding suburban areas such as Berwick and Pakenham. The headquarters of Centacare Gippsland are in Warragul, but it located its Bushfire Recovery Service in the Latrobe Valley town of Morwell. It has other sites in Sale, Bairnsdale and Berwick, the last being located on the fringes of Melbourne. Both Centacare Gippsland and Centacare Sandhurst cover large regional and rural areas with low population densities.

The relative newness of both Centacare Gippsland and Centacare Sandhurst partly explains their smaller size – they have not had the time to build up the same level of resources and public profile that has been afforded Centacare Melbourne. Their location outside Melbourne is also relevant. In a highly urbanised and centralised society such as Australia, capital cities are the centre of political and economic life (Infrastructure Australia 2010). The political environment at the time of their creation was also significant. When Centacare Gippsland was established the Victorian state government was engaged in a comprehensive set of changes to introduce new public management reforms throughout the public sector (Costar and Economou 1999). These involved establishing purchaser/provider arrangements for the delivery of services that specified in great detail how money was to be spent and what accountability arrangements were to be established (Hess 2003). Centacare Gippsland had no experience of receiving government funding on any other basis. Centacare Sandhurst, having been established in the 1980s, had experienced an environment when grants were made to the organisation rather than to the program and had been able to develop on this basis (Beilharz, Considine and Watts 1992:99–122).

Centacare Melbourne had to find locations, in or near the bushfire-affected towns, and staff had to make their own places in the community. In Marysville, one of the worst-affected areas, there was no physical location available – most
of the town had burned – and Centacare staff were in a sense homeless, and worked with residents by ‘hanging out’. Both Centacare Gippsland and Centacare Sandhurst differ from Centacare Melbourne in that they already had staff and programs operating in or near to the fire affected regions. It is also possible that they had the initial advantage of familiarity with the results of natural disasters. Centacare Sandhurst, for example, had a drought counselling service already in place in response to the devastating effect of the long-lasting drought. This process enabled it to forge links with other organisations and position itself for future cooperative ventures.

Meeting the Short Term and Long Term Objectives

The three Centacares had both short-term and long-term objectives for their use of the Archbishop's Appeal money. The short-term objectives were the first and second outlined at the beginning of the project – meeting immediate needs and filling gaps over a two to three year period. The long-term objective was to create a sustainable community development response that would leave the communities in better shape than they had been before the fires. Meeting the short-term objectives was relatively straightforward. Meeting the long-term objective was more complex and required not only work on providing services but consideration of how to define the concept of sustainability in this context. This will be discussed later in the article.

Some Centacare Melbourne staff had been working at emergency and recovery centres since immediately after the fires; another became a case manager for several bushfire-affected families. Centacare Melbourne’s initial response to the invitation from the Fund was to appoint a consultant to produce a needs analysis for the area it covered. Its aim was to produce a strategy in accordance with the aims previously outlined. The needs analysis was completed in March 2009 and recommended the implementation of a community development model over a three-year period. By August 2009 Centacare Melbourne had appointed seven new staff members with counselling and community development backgrounds and dispatched them to work in some of the bushfire areas north of Melbourne. Centacare Gippsland had received some Commonwealth government funding very soon after the fires and used it to engage a full-time counsellor; it subsequently applied for funding from the Archbishop’s Fund, proposing a similar community development model to that outlined in the Centacare Melbourne needs assessment. Centacare Sandhurst had existing programs and a physical presence in the major town of Bendigo where one of the fires had occurred, and had been involved from very soon after the bushfires in supplying counselling and support services. It used the Archbishop’s Fund money to employ a counsellor and a community development worker who together constituted its Bushfire Recovery Service.

The funding from the Archbishop’s Fund differentiated the Centacares’ bushfire programs from their other programs. The bushfire programs were able to use a formal needs analysis and/or the combination of their own knowledge and insights obtained through local networks to develop an intervention model based upon actual needs and provide a basis for their applications to the Archbishop’s Fund. The Victorian and Commonwealth governments responded quickly to the disaster and put in a system to care for the people affected by the fires within days of the fire occurring. Contracts were given to various welfare agencies to undertake counselling and case management work which was largely defined by government departments. By contrast the Centacares were not constrained by criteria established by an external funding body. As the community needs changed or when programs became redundant they were able to respond by changing the directions of their programs. They could also take a long term approach knowing the funding was assured for three years. This is a rarity under government funding rules. The three year guarantee of untied funding for the Centacares meant that, as staff left and new staff were appointed, the experience of the new staff could be utilised in either adapting existing programs or commencing new ones.
Specific phases in the recovery process are common to post-disaster situations (Gordon 2004). Centacare staff recognised and worked with such phases, but also recognised that the bushfire affected communities differed from each other in many respects and that there was a need to take these differences into consideration in planning and delivering programs. Interviewees routinely commented on the differences in the communities and the need to change offerings and ways of doing things during the recovery process. They found that the most successful initiatives in the communities in the first year, such as bus trips to the Elmore Field Day and to the Marysville and Kinglake areas, the WaterWise Gardening Project, a youth leadership camp and a women’s week-end, were not always as successful in following years. There was also a change in communities’ uptake of counselling during the three-year period, with an initially slow uptake followed by a steady rise as other aspects of clients’ lives became more stressful. By the third year people felt the need to ‘move on’ from the recovery phase and return to normality: the need for counselling was reduced. For example, Centacare Gippsland found in 2012 that the demand for loss and trauma counselling had disappeared but that new issues, including marital breakdown, were arising after the initial period of trauma and grief. These changes required the recovery teams to be flexible and adaptable. The lack of tied funding made this task much easier than it would have been under a contract funding arrangement with a government body.

Centacare Melbourne began with a set of programs based on a community development approach, but found that this was better suited to some communities than others. It worked hard at finding what the community needed and delivering it but by the end of the second year it was faced with the question of continuity after the funding ended and in the light of its physical location:

Well one of the key things I think is how we could retain some sort of local governance of the project because I think that’s been the strength of what we’ve done so far and that is that it hasn’t just been here we are, here’s our services, we’re doing them to you. It’s been responding to the needs of the community as the community articulates it and if we’re permanently in an area, how do we maintain that as a response rather than we’ve got a head office in East Melbourne and this is our branch office out here so that it’s not just all top down type of directive but there’s a bit of a feedback that this is servicing our area well but what we really need is this or that or youth services or volunteer coordination or whatever. (BFM25)

As mentioned earlier, one of the conditions of the funding was that there should be a sustainable response. Initially, the three Centacares sought to meet the immediate needs of the fire affected communities quickly and efficiently. By the end of the first twelve months, the three Centacares were considering the question of what would happen when the Archbishop’s Fund money ran out and they needed to compete for funding from other sources, often in a competitive tendering environment. They also had to consider what would constitute a sustainable response and for how long it was appropriate to offer recovery services. Would or should the recovery services evolve into mainstream services? In later interviews with staff and managers we asked how they saw sustainability being achieved. What will happen when there is no more funding from the Archbishop’s Fund? This was a difficult question for both those employed on short term contracts and those who had on-going appointments at the three agencies. In a focus group that we conducted at the two-year point, several contract staff indicated that the Centacares would have to continue funding their positions once the Archbishop’s Fund money was exhausted. This clearly was unrealistic and not feasible, as much of the funding for these agencies comes through the delivery of specific services funded by Commonwealth or state governments. Some answers to questions about sustainability were couched in terms of what physical presence would remain. Others suggested that sustainability could only be achieved by obtaining other funding sources. By year three of the recovery effort, senior staff at Centacare Melbourne were seriously looking...
at how on-going support could be maintained for some programs. There was also recognition that the recovery programs that it had initially implemented could be replaced by other programs and services. As the interviewee below remarks, it might be time for Centacare Melbourne to move from recovery programs to core services:

I do have some fears that once the resources run out from the appeal, but also from the couple of other big community projects we’ve got involved in, which is only relatively short term funding, it’s a lot of money but it’s a short term for the on-ground assistance, that when all that finishes it’s not going to be seen as the state government leaving Kinglake it will be seen as CatholicCare leaving. So we’re going to have to manage community expectations around that, but it’s incumbent on us at this stage, and this is a major direction of our program now, and that’s to look for ongoing and sustainable funding for the provision of a set of core services into that community, probably around what we’re good at which is the family and relationship support services. (BFM25)

It cannot be assumed that governments will take over funding the Centacares’ programs when the Archbishop’s Fund money has been spent. These programs are not necessarily part of a government funding agenda or strategy. In addition, government funding is awarded as part of a formal tendering process; the opportunity to develop a program and apply for funding as the Centacares did to the Archbishop’s Fund is not available in this context. A down-side of not being part of the contract system with the government is that once an organisation is known as a preferred service, on-going funding is at least a possibility.

An option that might ensure sustainability is for the organisations to examine their own operations. This raises the possibility that the sustainability of programs is related to the sustainability and ingenuity of the organisations. The organisations by year three were certainly turning their attention to this. In terms of future planning Centacare Sandhurst has identified a number of key points arising from its experience. Firstly, there is a need to build and develop relationships with other organisations so that they can go into partnership together. Second, where possible, there should be on-going relationships with local government. This is based on Centacare Sandhurst’s own experience, not only with the bushfire recovery programs, but also with other parts of its work. Third, the priority is not necessarily to develop new programs but to discover what the community wants and facilitate that happening. Finally, there is a need to be flexible. Centacare Sandhurst’s major focus has been on family relationships but the bushfire programs have taken a different direction. This has been helped by the fact that staff can do outreach programs in bushfire recovery because they have already been doing outreach work in other areas.

Centacare Gippsland is looking in a slightly different direction. It recognises that it ‘missed the boat’ (BFG10) organisationally because it was established in the 1990s. Older organisations were able to establish themselves differently because they began in an era when funding was allocated on a different basis. This difference was elucidated by the relative flexibility of the funding from the Archbishop’s Fund:

Absolutely, the bushfire funding and the lack of restriction around how the service plan would be shaped and the shifting according to the review is very rare and unfortunately it’s not common . . . If there was more of that framework it would get better results because it gives you that sense of what’s working, what’s not working, the shift. But you can understand in most of our funded areas are here’s the cohort, here’s the identified cohorts, this is the service we’re delivering, here’s the numbers we want, end of story, go do it and the conversation very much focused on those numbers and a little on the quality of the product. (BFG10)

Centacare Gippsland would also like to see a different perspective on funding, particularly in rural areas. Sporadic funding of programs, regardless of how well they are delivered or how much they are needed, is not enough to ensure an ongoing service to rural communities, which often have greater needs than urban areas. Its own experience suggests a need for core funding that can be topped up when crises arise. As Alford (2002:342) has pointed out government agencies have no vested interest in doing anything for clients beyond their
legislative mandate and administrative rules. In this context, while governments may find it in their interests to serve clients as well as possible, their agenda and priorities may not coincide with those of welfare organisations.

Life for Centacare Melbourne is in some ways more complicated. It is well known in a few metropolitan communities but for the most part is unknown, particularly in rural areas. It cannot have a relationship with each of the numerous local governments which it covers because of their large number and the relative smallness of the organisation, and it is unlikely to have a relationship with all the other welfare agencies operating across the various communities. However, being part of the Melbourne Archdiocese also has advantages; it is very large and has greater access to resources than Gippsland and Sandhurst. There are also numerous other Catholic organisations that Centacare Melbourne could work with and that could fill gaps initially, and others (whether Catholic or not) that could be called on for assistance. However, the mission and focus of these organisations, particularly those outside the Catholic sector, may differ from those of the Centacares and some compromises and negotiations may be needed.

Another perspective was that sustainability is about relationships at a higher level:

...the issue is around developing relationships at a political level which is relationships that we don’t currently have with State Government. We had glimpses of relationships but we need to develop a relationship with the bureaucrats... There is a whole lot of thinking that needs to happen at this level that will impact what happens on the ground so it is that nexus. It is not going to be us all here who are going to solve this problem, it is going to have to be political will that puts influence and pressure on the funding body, the State and Commonwealth government, the policy and strategy stuff that needs to be ramped up. (BFM09)

Another interviewee was less sanguine about the possibilities of building sustainable programs:

Sustainability is a constant battle and it comes, the money comes and goes, so no program is sustainable. Some programs, every program, has a normal life span and there’s going to be comings and goings but every government funding is a three year guarantee, there’s no guarantee, it may be a large program, employing ten people but in three years it may be all gone so sustainability is a bit of a furphy. (BFG10)

These are two contrasting views. The first person sees developing political relationships as the key to getting more funding, while the second recognises that the nature of the funding is the result of government policy which is unlikely to change.

An alternative put by a number of interviewees was that what they would leave behind was increased capacity. They saw their contribution, and to some extent the community development approach in general, as being capacity building – leaving a stronger, more resilient and more skilled community behind when they leave. It was capacity building that would ensure that something sustainable remained after their role ended. One such approach has been to try to up-skill members of the community so that they were able to advocate to local and state government on their own behalf. An example of this related to the clearing of burnt trees along a main road which residents found distressing and wanted removed. Centacare staff worked with the community to support community members in meetings with state and local government and eventually an agreement was reached that some clearing would be done. They assisted the community to set up meetings, helped in the writing of submissions and advocated on their behalf. Another example was small loans given to community members to establish small businesses such as jam-making or wood-cutting.

A number of interviewees indicated that they were anxious that the Centacares avoid developing dependency on their services when, at the end of three years, the funding would run out. This was of particular concern in respect to those communities that prior to the fires had few services located in the town and/or groups of people who had pre-existing complex needs. In order to avoid the risk of making communities reliant on services that had a fixed endpoint, the focus in years two and three shifted...
towards capacity building, particularly in terms of developing knowledge and skills:

... I guess what I would say is whenever you are working in communities you need to think about not building reliance because if you build a reliance it is more damaging than those people never having had those services before so before the services come in, they don't actually know any different but once you build an expectation and then take that away, that can create more damage so all the work we do is around trying to build the community's capacity so leave the skills and the knowledge with the community. (BFS02)

Capacity building was also seen as assisting residents or resident groups to gain knowledge and confidence to be able to advocate with government and semi-government bodies and to provide input into decisions about their communities:

I think in some sense and it depends how you look at sustainability... whether it is the community having choice and decision and input as to where memorials are placed in their community. And it might be they've had that decision and memorials placed and the first year is acknowledged, and the second year, but it gives the opportunity for the community five years down the track to make their own arrangements because the memorial will still be there, the government won't care whether they are going to do a celebration or not, so it will be about the community making a decision about that and it forces them to come back together again to make a decision or talk about that or one or two people to spark the interest of the rest of the community or not. But I think in some respects those things will be there now and will be forever and the community will also know that they can, as a group of people, come together and with the help of people facilitating that, but they can do that themselves. (BFS08)

Despite the problems there is a degree of optimism amongst organisations and staff that the outcomes of their work will be long lasting. As the project approached its end in June 2012, the Centacare Sandhurst bushfire team reiterated to the researchers their confidence that ‘the community now has the strength and resources within their communities and by utilising existing support services to respond to their ongoing recovery needs’ (Centacare Sandhurst Bushfire Recovery Team 2012:3).

Conclusion

The three Centacares recognise that, although they have delivered appropriate recovery programs and met needs in the bushfire areas over the three years in which they were funded by the Archbishop’s Fund, they are faced with the problem of sustainability. This is especially a problem because one of the aims of the funding was that the programs be sustainable and that the areas where they operated should be left in a better condition than before the programs were implemented. In the current policy environment, government funding will not allow not-for-profits the flexibility to develop programs based on their own assessments of appropriateness and need. They will need to return to the purchaser-provider relationship that has existed between government and agencies in the not-for-profit sector for the last decade. Particularly in the case of Centacare Melbourne, which had no services in the bushfire areas before the fires, there is no evidence that services can continue or that a physical presence in the area can be maintained in the long term.

Nonetheless, Centacare Melbourne has achieved significant further short term Victorian government funding to continue some programs. This advances the objective of a continued Centacare Melbourne presence. While it might be argued that this is short term, the longer term is a succession of short terms; although relatively modest in size, it extends the presence, and provides a further base for working towards an ongoing presence. Centacare Melbourne will continue to seek partnership arrangements and make services based in their existing offices available to residents of these regions. The work that has been done in applying for and successfully gaining with other partners in the three-year period should make it easier for the Centacares to be considered for more funding for specific programs. The situation is rather different for Centacare Gippsland and Centacare Sandhurst because they were already located in the area, so it is
probable that services will continue, even if at a reduced level.

The programs offered by the Centacares were not substantially different in content from programs offered by other organisations with a different funding model. However, because of the flexibility of the funding offered by the Archbishop’s Fund they differed in the ability of the Centacares to change direction. They adapted to the needs of the community as expressed to them by the community. In addition, much of the success of the programs depended on Centacare staff being adaptable and flexible.

There are other significant factors in how not-for-profits can prepare for the future. In considering how they can make programs sustainable they need also to consider geography, population size and spread, existing services in the region and relationships with other key players including local government. However, these are minor in comparison to the fact that the sector in general is subject to government policy in relation to funding. The current funding model has existed for a long time and is the result of an ideological shift in how government manages itself and funds services. It would require another such ideological shift and an equal amount of time for the present system to change. There seems no indication of that happening, although it is quite possible that any change would move even further to the neo-liberal position.

References


