Social sustainability and the sustainability of organisations that support communities: challenges and approaches

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Kildonan UnitingCare is a community service organisation in the north west metropolitan area of Melbourne, subject to the multitude of current national and global pressures on non-profit and health and community service sectors. For example, as charitable and public money has withered, a trend that will likely continue for an extended period, the need for the services and advocacy provided by the non-profit sector has significantly increased. At risk are the vast majority of nonprofits—mostly small- and mid-sized groups.   Australia is not immune. The issue of funding has begun to hit many community sector organisations in Australia. Compounding with this, specific challenges for community service organisations include:

1. Lack of simple clear and consistent regulation and a steep increase in regulatory controls,

2. Increased complexity of service user issues and circumstances and associated stresses,

3. Highly targeted and rigid funding contracts for services,

4. Decreasing labour force supply, and higher turnover rates,

5. High costs of data collection,

6. Inconsistencies around reporting and measuring the contribution of the sector,

7. Pressure for further productivity gains without the necessary investment and funding into capacity building and innovation,

8. Pressure for tender submissions to have several services involved as partners (not of itself a bad thing, however there is an added resource requirement in managing new partners), and

9. All of this is to be addressed whilst also being expected to provide innovative 'solutions' that address service user needs - now a regular requirement of many government funding submissions. The irony here is that innovation has its own system requirements, one of which is the flexibility to be creative, to not have to wait for tenders or new policies, and some time of trial and development.

So how de we work strategically and operationally in order to be both sustainable and innovative? How might we be optimally responsive and reflexive in addressing community needs and aspirations, while providing support and facilitating power, equity, dignity and autonomy? These questions will be explored in this presentation. Models of organic organisational responsiveness and adaptation will also be proposed as food for thought and discussion.