

Government is recognising the potential for social enterprise in Australia

Jonathon Bland's insights on government engagement in relation to social enterprise in the UK over the last ten years is a timely contribution towards considering the role government here in Australia can play towards building a robust and growing sector.

Social enterprises have a long and successful, albeit relatively unknown, history here in Australia. There are many examples of world-class, innovative social enterprises operating throughout the country addressing a broad range of social challenges in both metropolitan and rural communities. We do however lag behind the UK and some other countries in relation to the broader policy and support framework in which social enterprises exist. There is also much less knowledge and awareness in Australia recognising social enterprise as a force for social, community and economic development.

But 'the times are a changing'. Social Traders will soon publish research findings from the 'Finding Australia's Social Enterprise Sector' (FASES) Project undertaken over the last 18 months in partnership with QUT, that maps social enterprise activity around Australia for the first time. In 2007, the incoming Federal Labor Government put social enterprise on the national landscape as part of its social inclusion policy agenda and more recently, as part of the economic stimulus package, has provided direct funding to social enterprises in recognition of the capacity for social enterprises to contribute to employment and economic development in priority areas. On the back of supportive state and local governments, the emergence of social enterprise support organisations, philanthropic funders and university programs we are beginning to see the establishment of a sector.

Given the nascent state of the sector here, what lessons can we take from the UK in terms of ensuring we build a sound policy environment for social enterprise to thrive and become an increasingly important part of the Australian economy?

My view is that, whilst recognising clear differences between our respective institutional and operating environments, there are several issues shared by Jonathon from the UK experience that will be critical to successful development of the social enterprise sector in Australia.

I make the following suggestions:

- We should work to achieving cross-party support for social enterprise at federal and state levels. Governments should incorporate support for social enterprise development as part of their policy platforms to ensure a long-term policy and support framework is established beyond our 3 or 4 year electoral cycles. The Victorian Government has shown leadership with its commitment to social enterprise and neighbourhood renewal over the last 7 years as part of 'A Fairer Victoria'.
- A national social enterprise action plan should be developed between Governments and sector organisations to provide a blueprint and policy framework that supports growth of social enterprise in Australia over the next 5 to 10 years.
- Government should broaden its lens on the scope and impact of social enterprise beyond employment creation for disadvantaged people to focus more broadly on community regeneration, service innovation and strengthening the viability of third sector organisations.

- Government can take a leadership role in opening up markets for social enterprise through procurement and tendering of services. There are already some excellent examples of social procurement occurring at state and local government levels.
- In the absence of major direct public funding as has been the case in the UK over the last decade, Governments in Australia need to partner with and invest in specialist support organisations to provide effective and tailored on-the-ground support to individual social enterprises. There is evidence of such commitments made by various levels of government including Social Traders, the Australian Employee Buyout Centre (AEBC), and SVA's social enterprise hubs.
- Fostering a cross-sector collaborative approach which leverages the resources, skills and capabilities of corporate, community and philanthropic organisations to support individual social enterprises through their business cycles.
- Government should be involved in raising awareness and building the evidence base of social enterprise through collaborative research and evaluation and promotion of social enterprise networks and forums.

I do believe that Government has an important role to play in creating a supportive and conducive environment for social enterprise development. Whilst there are some parallels, Government engagement in Australia will not be the same as the UK. Organisations like Social Traders can assist in building awareness and understanding amongst various levels of government about the benefits of social enterprise. The challenge and opportunity for us is to learn from the UK experience over the last 10 years as we build on the rising interest from all sectors here in Australia to create a strong and robust social enterprise sector.

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