

Families Australia comment on the proposed National Compact

Families Australia is a peak, independent, not-for-profit organisation promoting the interests of families at the national level. Established in 2001, Families Australia has a diverse membership base of around 400 family and community sector organisations, comprising peak national bodies and regional and local community service organisations, such as parenting, relationships and youth services and child care centres. Families Australia provides policy input to governments and government agencies and informs the community about national family issues. The following comments have been developed in consultation with Families Australia member organisations.

Families Australia supports, in principle, the development of a Compact. Our support is contingent on the stated intention of the Commonwealth Government being realised, that is, that a Compact will better define the relationship between the Commonwealth Government and the not-for-profit sector and will enable both sectors to do their jobs more effectively in the service of society.

For a Compact to be effective, we believe it should:

- provide a dynamic basis for a significant and sustained improvement in relations between governments and not-for-profit community sector organisations;
- recognise the independence of the not-for-profit community sector and its role in enhancing civil society and social inclusion;
- recognise mutual responsibilities: governments have a responsibility to support the sector, while the sector has a responsibility to provide governments with information and advice about community needs in order to assist in the development of effective public policy;
- ensure that the contributions of not-for-profit organisations to public policy design, implementation and evaluation are improved through regular consultation and communication. Specifically, there should be agreed protocols for engagement and dialogue that respect and value different roles and viewpoints and address significant issues;
- provide a basis for exploration of sector needs and practical improvements in sector capacities (for example, in streamlining accountability requirements and adequately addressing workforce retention and development issues);
- be adequately resourced; and
- lay the framework for community engagement which guides the way in which governments involve the community, including community organisations, in public policy development.

The Compact should take into account the diverse nature and requirements of community sector organisations. The nature of the interaction between governments and smaller organisations (which may, for example, be Indigenous-managed or operate only in rural and remote areas) will often be different from government interaction with larger not-for-profit community organisations. It is also important for government departments to develop nationally consistent ways of working with not-for-profit community organisations.

Importantly, a Compact should encourage innovative ways of collaborating within the not-for-profit sector and between the sector and governments. The collaborative development of the National Child Protection Framework is one example. In the past nine months, as a sector initiative coordinated by Families Australia, 63 of Australia's largest NGOs working in the field of child protection have joined to form the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children, which has been working closely with the Commonwealth Government to advance this important shared policy goal. The Compact might usefully seek to encourage and support this type of collaborative, unifying and innovative practice.

Families Australia also makes the point that it is important that relationships between governments at all levels and across the not-for-profit sector be enhanced. We therefore encourage the Commonwealth Government to engage with the State/Territory governments to develop a truly National, as distinct from a Commonwealth, Compact.

As to structure, consideration should be given to a multi-layered Compact which, at the higher level, encompasses all not-for-profit organisations, inclusive of the community and human service sector, sport and recreational groups, environmental and arts interests, but excluding those established to promote the interests of political parties or private for-profit enterprise.

Underneath this umbrella Compact, scope should be given to allow 'sectoral' agreements which pick up on specific areas of policy interest. These second level agreements would allow a focus in the community and human services sector on the social inclusion agenda or other areas of public policy aimed at improving the wellbeing of marginalised or disadvantaged Australians.

On practicalities, we suggest that, to ensure the ongoing maintenance of commitment by the parties, an operational group be established. This would comprise representatives of the parties to guide operation of the Compact and ensure that communication channels are kept open. This group should facilitate dialogue around contemporary issues and establish a mechanism to resolve disputes and a process to monitor the ongoing commitment and contributions of the parties.

Families Australia looks forward to being closely involved in the further development of a Compact and, subject to the acceptability of its final terms, becoming a high level signatory to it.

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