

3.5. Lack of data

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In commencing this study, we sought to obtain the most recently published sector wide data. What we found was that very little systematic data is available on the Australian Social Economy. The last authoritative scoping was conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics using 1999/2000 data[25]. Prior to that Mark Lyons at CACOM conducted a review that defined the sector in Australia over the period 1993-1996.

Complementing these two aging studies is a grab bag of data points that cannot be easily cross-referenced or validated against other data. Furthermore, most of the studies have not been repeated, so even when there might be two data points looking at the same issue (size of sector, revenue mix, philanthropy gifts, volunteering etc); the numbers cannot be reliably compared as the methodologies differ.

Not having a common data set means that everyone is working from different information and developing their own hypotheses. For example, the amount of wasted resources and in particular the administration costs of charities will be frequently cited in the study. But we simply do not know the current levels of expense, their variance, and how they compare to the for-profit sector. Similarly, there is much talk about the need to reduce fragmentation through the merger of small organisations. But we do not know the current organisational profile, formation rates, failure rates or the sub-sectors that present the greatest opportunities for increased effectiveness through consolidation.

Consequently matters of policy and policy issues tend to be debated on the basis of conjecture rather than good data or evidence.

If the Social Economy had:

- A language based on agreed understandings; and
- A heightened awareness for the need for a view of research as systematic enquiry made public (an approach to research consistent with the values – equity-access, social justice etc - of the sector),

then many of complexities and difficulties faced by the social sector might be more easily addressed.

Hence, we have found there is a not only a lack of data about the sector, but also a lack of systematically derived and really useful knowledge (that is, the product of research) which might contribute to a strategic action program from which the sector might benefit. This study despite its limitations aims to begin the process of laying out important issues for the sector as shown in the next chapter.

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