Demographic change and representation in policy making: Challenges and opportunities for seniors’ organisations in a changing Australia

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As in other parts of the world, the ageing of Australia’s population brings with it demographic changes that create a complex environment for nonprofit seniors’ organisations. This is particularly the case for organisations that represent seniors’ interests in policy making, and on whose knowledge and association with older people policy makers frequently draw.

This complexity stems from the demographic change of population ageing in two ways. First, population ageing is a phenomenon occurring across the world that is resulting in an increasing proportion of older people within the population. In Australia, it is estimated that the proportion of over 65s will increase to between 26 and 38 percent of the Australian population by 2051 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005), with a threefold increase in the proportion of over 80s to 9.4% by 2051 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). For seniors’ organisations, this means an increasing number of seniors and potential members whose interests they are expected to represent. Second, population ageing brings not only an increasing proportion of older people within the population but also increasing focus on diversity among those people. In Australia, issues like cultural and linguistic diversity, socio-economic diversity, locality, work differences and generational or cohort differences are among those that create a heterogeneous older population (Warburton & Petriwskyj, 2007) and a complex constituency for organisations.

Such a growing constituency presents challenges to these organisations, and the diversity of the older population has important implications for their processes. In particular, when these agencies are expected to cover the broad range of issues associated with ageing, their ability to properly represent their constituents is compromised. Both older people themselves and policy makers frequently rely on seniors’ organisations (such as COTA and National Seniors in Australia) to be the voice of seniors. However, age alone does not necessarily engender a common interest or set of interests (Walker, 2007). In the context of these changing demographics therefore, these selected agencies cannot be expected to have expertise across the diversity of issues involved (Warburton & Petriwskyj, 2007). The time, commitment and resources required place pressures on these organisations which may compromise their ability to properly represent the interests of their constituents or their ability to fulfill their other goals.

Thus, while their role in the policy process is an issue of broader governance and policy making, the internal processes by which they develop a representative policy position are concerns for their administration. With representation of these interests a core business of such organisations, the way in which they cater for a diverse constituency is a key aspect of their internal processes. There are a range of potential issues relating to effectiveness, internal and external legitimacy, capacity and ultimately, sustainability. Challenges arise within these organisations when individuals represent the group, and when the group attempts to engage with the community and with government. The implications of these challenges for the management and processes of such organisations are important for the success of policy processes as well as the effectiveness and sustainability of the organisations themselves.

This problem raises a number of questions regarding the operations of these organisations and how they are able to manage the expectations of their constituents. These questions relate to whose interests among the diversity of older people they perceive themselves as
representing and what strategies they employ to engage with a diverse range of views, how they balance their role in policy making with their other goals and missions and what implications this has for the effectiveness of the organisation, and the management and operational structures they have in place to support their activities in a changing demographic environment. In other words, given the challenges presented to such organisations as a result of population ageing, what are the implications for the governance and management of the organisation, how it is sustained, and how it fulfils its various goals? This paper reports on a study exploring this among seniors’ organisations.

A document analysis and a series of qualitative interviews with representatives of key organisations speaking for seniors’ interests in policy making in Australia provided data on this question. Key findings address understandings of diversity and how diverse views are acknowledged and managed, and how the range of goals and conflicting responsibilities are managed. Implications for seniors’ organisations and their role in policy making are then discussed.

References


