



AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter
Global Thought Leader
Real Insights & Authority



THE DEATH OF CIVIL SOCIETY?

Is there a slow death of the community spirit? Non-governmental organizations (such as service clubs, religious bodies and advocacy groups) maintain the fabric of society. But can they maintain their own fabric? Many organizations are reporting a decline in membership and have financial problems.

The future cannot be predicted with any precision. But we can be sure that it will be different from the present. We are living in a period of rapid change. Many things we have taken for granted are changing. But some things remain the same. The challenge is to be prepared for the changes and continuations. Creating scenarios is a way of helping us to think about the unthinkable and reduce the risk of our being taken by surprise.

Here are two scenarios on the future of non-governmental organizations. Scenarios should have memorable titles: these are called "Recessional" and "Tango".



Recessional

The "recessional" is a hymn sung as the clergy and choir withdraw at the end of the church service and people can look forward to some refreshments in the church hall. Many non-governmental organizations are in a "recessional" mindset.

Membership is literally dying off. These organizations often draw their membership pool from the people born before World War II. These people (the "Depression Generation") know the value of contributing to the community because they saw how well it worked in the Depression and wartime. They value loyalty and tradition and have a high regard for institutions of all sorts.

But they are not being replaced. They often cannot get their children (the "Baby Boomers") to join organizations to the same extent as they did. However, because this is such a large population cohort, a small slice of the Boomer generation helps maintain numbers.

The Boomers did not have the struggle of their parents; they grew up in the post-war economic boom and so often have a different mindset towards contributing back to the community. The Depression Generation vowed that their children would not have to endure what

they had to and so they created a society in which their children were well catered for. They were too successful. The Boomers are history's most selfish generation.

The Depression Generation's grandchildren ("Generation X") do not join organizations. They may turn up for a specific event on a particular day (if they feel like it) but they will not commit themselves to being involved on a regular basis (such as by serving on committees).

Generation X have learned to live with fluidity and transitory relationships. After all, their Boomer parents are the most divorced generation in history and so they became accustomed to their mothers having a variety of boyfriends or to living in blended families. They are sceptical about all "institutions", be it the traditional family or non-governmental organizations.

These organizations are particularly running out of women. Women have been the backbone of these organizations for decades, if not centuries. The men may have done the talking and held the official positions but the women did the work. Women were often involved as a way of contributing to a better society, and as a way of escaping the drudgery of homework and the work facilitated their personal growth and development.

But now many women have their own careers to look after. They may also be raising families single-handedly. They may also be looking after aging parents.

Alongside these demographic factors, there are also economic reasons for the Recessional scenario. Before the current era of down-sizing and economic rationalism, people had more time for community activities. Indeed, there may have been a company expectation of such activities. For example, some banks expected their managers in country towns to become treasurers of local organizations as a way of showing that the bank was anxious to put something back into the community and so they were a "pillar of the local community". Now banks are more concerned about their shareholders (who could be anywhere in the world). As some conservative economists have argued, the business of business is business and so corporate philanthropy is theft. Meanwhile, people are now working longer hours and so have to spend more time on their business than on community activities.

It is also becoming more difficult to run non-governmental organizations. Volunteers have to be insured, trained and supervised; appointing employees entails extensive government red tape; treasurers do not like all the new GST requirements; staff working with children have to be subjected to police checks; and boards are now expected to meet the new corporate governance requirements. No doubt many of the government regulations were well intended but cumulatively they have made the actual running of organizations much more onerous.

Governments treat the organizations with discourtesy. For example, they set unreasonable deadlines for submissions to government enquiries. The current Charity Definition Inquiry - looking at a set of laws going back four centuries - gave the public only a few weeks in

which to make submissions (and that was over the Christmas period). This implies that a government's time is important but the public's is not.

If the Recessional scenario seems too alarmist, then there is the example of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which has a branch in each Australian state. It is almost impossible to write a social history of Australia in the 19th century/ early 20th century without referring to the WCTU. Whatever the issue, they were involved: opposition to the liquor barons, votes for women (with the expectation that female politicians would take a tougher line with the liquor barons), and opposing war and the white Australia policy. Now Australian branches have considerable property but few members. I know of one branch which has a property worth almost a \$1 million but an annual budget of \$20,000 (and a "youth worker" aged in her 70s).

No non-governmental organization has a guaranteed future. There is already a sense of crisis in some. Once an organization hits a downward spiral, it continues. For example, declining members mean declining income, so staff (if any) are laid off, so members get fewer services for their fees, and so they are reluctant to renew their subscriptions.

✓ TANGO

TANGO is alternative scenario. The acronym means Third Age Non-Governmental Organization. The tango dance is agile, swift, and colourful.

The starting point is again demographic. There has been a silent revolution. People in western countries have gained as much life expectancy in the last century as they did in the previous 5,000 years (about 25 years). There is a new "age". Previously people were young, middle aged and elderly. Now there is a new age after the formal middle age paid working stage in a person's life and before people are ready for their fourth age: to go into residential aged care. In this "third age", people are still in good health, may have access to superannuation funds, and have high expectations about a long and active life. Retirement is a health hazard. Being involved in non-governmental organizations is good for a person's health because it gives them a sense of purpose and a way of being useful to the community. It gets them out of the house and away from the television.

Alternatively, they may have been down-sized out of full-time employment and so like voluntary work as a change from the fast pace of their consulting work. It may also appeal to unemployed people as a way of networking in the search for further employment.

The Baby Boomers are now entering their 50s. Will they rediscover their sense of social justice and rebellion which characterized the 1960s/1970s? Non-governmental organizations could be good vehicles for them to relive their exciting days of youthful struggle. There is no shortage of good causes to attract them.

Meanwhile, the largest transfer of wealth in world history is underway as the Depression Generation die off and leave their assets to their Baby Boomer children. Will the Boomers donate some of the money to good causes? There is also a new world of e-giving which has been made possible by the internet. As recently as 1998, philanthropy and voluntarism sites were rare on the internet. Now there are thousands of companies in the US setting up sites. The sites sell items and invite donations. The Indian earthquake tragedy has galvanized expat Indian communities around the world to make donations through the internet. There could be a new golden age of philanthropy coming.

✓ **Cannot Predict the Future**

The future cannot be predicted. Scenario planning encourages people to think about what could happen and for them to have contingency plans in place. It is not possible to predict which of the two scenarios will come into play.

The immediate task for non-governmental organizations is to draw up indicators to see which of the two scenarios is coming into play. These could include: level of membership, membership revenue, donations, and bequests.

There is also a need for brain-storming to see what actions could be taken to avert "Recessional" coming into play, such as: what new programmes could be introduced to attract new members, what new membership categories could be introduced, how could the organization function with different notions of membership. For example, Rotary has recently allowed women to join. The next challenge is to move away from a membership based on categories of trade or profession, which no longer makes sense in an era when people change their jobs so often. Rotary also requires a certain level of regular membership attendance; this may need to be relaxed to accommodate the busy lives that people now lead.

The next stage in the scenario planning process would be to have contingency plans to cope with either scenarios coming into play. For example, if Recessional comes into play for an organization, will there be a "gold rush" as unscrupulous people enter non-governmental organizations to get eventual access to their assets (such as buildings and capital reserves)? What mechanisms do these organizations have to protect themselves against "entryism"? Branch stacking already occurs in political party branches - will there be a form of organization stacking to get eventual access to the assets once the current officials retire or die?

What exit strategies do the non-governmental organizations have if they need to wind themselves up? Are the members psychologically prepared for the role of executioner: the decision to terminate a dying organization which may have a history going back for as long as two centuries (or two millennia in the case of churches)? We know the trauma associated with

Australian farmers who have to leave the properties they inherited and their despair as they hold themselves responsible for poor stewardship of a proud tradition.

If TANGO comes in to play, what plans do non-governmental organizations have to attract the Baby Boomers looking for good causes in which to "make a difference"? The Boomers will be entering the organizations after a hectic career in business or the professions. They will not be keen on "old-fashioned" rituals that their parents liked (partly because they were liked by their parents). They will be more results-oriented and less process-oriented. They will not be there out of any intrinsic sense of loyalty and so they will move on if they are dissatisfied.

Will existing members be ready to make the changes necessary to accommodate the new members? For example, in churches it is sometimes the case that the families that keep the church doors open, are also the families who keep the church pews empty. In other words, their dedication to the local church keeps the church ticking over. But they are reluctant to accept new members because they want to make changes to the liturgy, type of worship etc and so the newcomers go elsewhere. How will such families learn to "let go" and become reconciled to the fact that a new generation wants to do things differently?

To conclude, scenario planning helps us to rethink our perceptions. It encourages us to think about the future differently. It also helps us deal with denial. Denial is a defence mechanism to protect ourselves from bad news. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it". But that desire for security may in the long run make us even more insecure as we are taken by surprise by events for which we have no preparations. Non-governmental organizations ought to be taking a long strategic look at their future - if case they may not have one.

Keith Suter