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MEDIA RELEASE

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Agreement between Government and community sector a concern

The Rudd Government and the community sector are currently considering entering into an agreement together, which would set out the terms of their future working relationship. A new report by Australia Institute Research Fellow Gemma Edgar, *Agreeing to Disagree: Maintaining dissent in the NGO sector*, argues that community groups should be very careful about signing such an agreement.

“While the Rudd Government's desire to build bridges with the community sector should be applauded, any decision to enter into a formal compact needs to be carefully considered by both sides”, said Ms Edgar. “The idea that the Government and the community sector can agree on how they will work together constructively sounds good in theory, but experience shows it is the sincerity of both parties, not the words of a formal agreement, that is the key to a positive relationship.”

“As recently as last year the Iemma Government distanced itself from an agreement between the NSW government and the NSW community sector on the basis that it had been signed by the previous Premier, Bob Carr. If these agreements don't hold when there is a change of Premier, even within the same party, what chance have they got of withstanding a change of government?” asked Ms Edgar.

A compact is a set of non-binding guidelines that frame the relationship between government and NGOs. The Rudd Government has committed to the introduction of a national compact, and is currently consulting with NGOs regarding the development of such an agreement by 2009.

“Compacts themselves do not guarantee the legitimacy of the community sector. Nor can they be relied upon to ensure an effective and respectful long-term relationship between government and NGOs. These things will only occur if NGO advocacy is recognised as a legitimate and valuable element of public debate,” concluded Ms Edgar.

The report builds on the Australia Institute's previous work on the capacity of the non-government sector to be an effective voice for change.

The report can be downloaded in full from the Institute's website – www.tai.org.au.