

Voice Lessons:**A Discussion Paper on the Ecology and Leadership in the Canadian Voluntary Sector**

What is the ecology of the voluntary sector in Canada and what are the emerging leadership models? In a federated system with shifting jurisdictional boundaries and evolving relationships between the public, private, and voluntary sector, the question of how the voluntary sector is organized and who speaks for the voluntary sector is rather complex.

When we look at the underpinnings of federalism, it is easy to see why there has been such an interest in distributed power, networks, and horizontality, within the Canadian voluntary sector. If we believe that decisions need to be made by those most affected by them, that the parts need each other as much as they need the center, and that innovation thrives furthest from the centre¹, then the drive to find new ways of mobilizing and engaging in public policy dialogue is even more compelling.

Voluntary organizations come together naturally through a variety of structures such as coalitions, associations, and networks, based on commonality in four basic areas:

1. **Geography** (local communities, regions, provinces, or territories, rural communities)
2. **Sub-Sector or Organizational Type** (health, environment, or recreation)
3. **Constituency or Client Group** (youth, seniors, or new Canadians)
4. **Issue, Purpose, Expertise** (safer streets, ethics, evaluation, or funding)

Background:

In the winter of 2002, momentum was growing across Canada to build **connection, cohesion, and capacity**, within the broader voluntary sector, with the simultaneous and independent emergence of local, regional, territorial and provincial voluntary sector networks (coalitions, councils, civic forums, and chambers). Though different in origin and structure, these networks all sought to build healthier communities through a recognized and vibrant voluntary sector².

In the dawn of the signing of the Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector (December 5, 2001)³, some key questions were being raised. How will a national accord be relevant and meaningful at the community level? How will this make a difference to the quality of life of Canadian citizens? What kind of *national* voluntary sector governance model is

¹ Handy, Charles, Balancing Corporate Power: A New Federalist Paper, Harvard Business Review, 1992.

² Excerpts from previous paper (Voices of A Vibrant Voluntary Sector, February 2002)

³ The Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector recognizes the valuable contributions of the voluntary sector, sets out a framework for mutual accountability, and outlines principles of engagement as they carry out their complementary roles in creating civil society.

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required to give life to the principles set out in the accord and to ensure continuity of the foundational work of the (Canadian) Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI)⁴. In October of 2002, the Voluntary Sector **Forum**, now comprised of 22 voluntary sector leaders, was launched.

At the same time, these *local, regional, provincial and territorial* networks were looking to establish a connection with one another in order to; share resources and information; to build individual and collective capacity; and to identify opportunities for collaboration. While there have been some synergies created by these parallel processes, they have remained distinct and complementary in their origin, structure, goals, and sense of timing.

In July of 2002, 13 voluntary sector networks established the Canadian **Federation** of Voluntary Sector Networks. The **Federation** links the networks together, facilitates resource and information sharing, and serves as a conduit for strengthening of their capacity.

Models of Voluntary Sector Networks in Canada:

Each voluntary sector network in Canada has evolved out of a unique set of social, political, geographic, and economic realities. However, of the 13 founding members of the Federation, they all followed some version of an asset-based community development model (McKnight, 2001). They were focused on leveraging community strengths by maximizing their capacity, through collective action.

These voluntary sector networks aim to develop a *cross-sector* constituency, bringing together voluntary organizations from the full range of sub-sectors (Health and Social Services, Sports and Recreation, Arts and Culture, Education, Human Rights, Environment, Faith and Spirituality, Philanthropy, Community Development, and International Development).

However, a number of networks are also *multi-sector* in composition, bringing together representatives from the voluntary sector, all levels of government, the labour movement, and the

⁴ The Voluntary Sector Initiative was launched by the Government of Canada, in partnership with the voluntary sector, in June 2000 with \$95 million funding commitment aimed at responding to the recommendations made in the report of the Joint Round Tables, Working Together (August 1999).

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corporate sector to develop a strategy to sustain the voluntary sector and have a greater impact on public policy. There are five local, one regional, one territorial, and six provincial voluntary sector networks, among the founding membership of the Federation.

After reviewing the profiles of the 13 emerging and existing voluntary sector networks in Canada, a three-prong circular model has emerged (See 3-C Model on the following page). While each network has expressed its individual purpose and activities in its mission, objectives or goals in different words and with different emphasis, all of the networks are in some way aiming to:

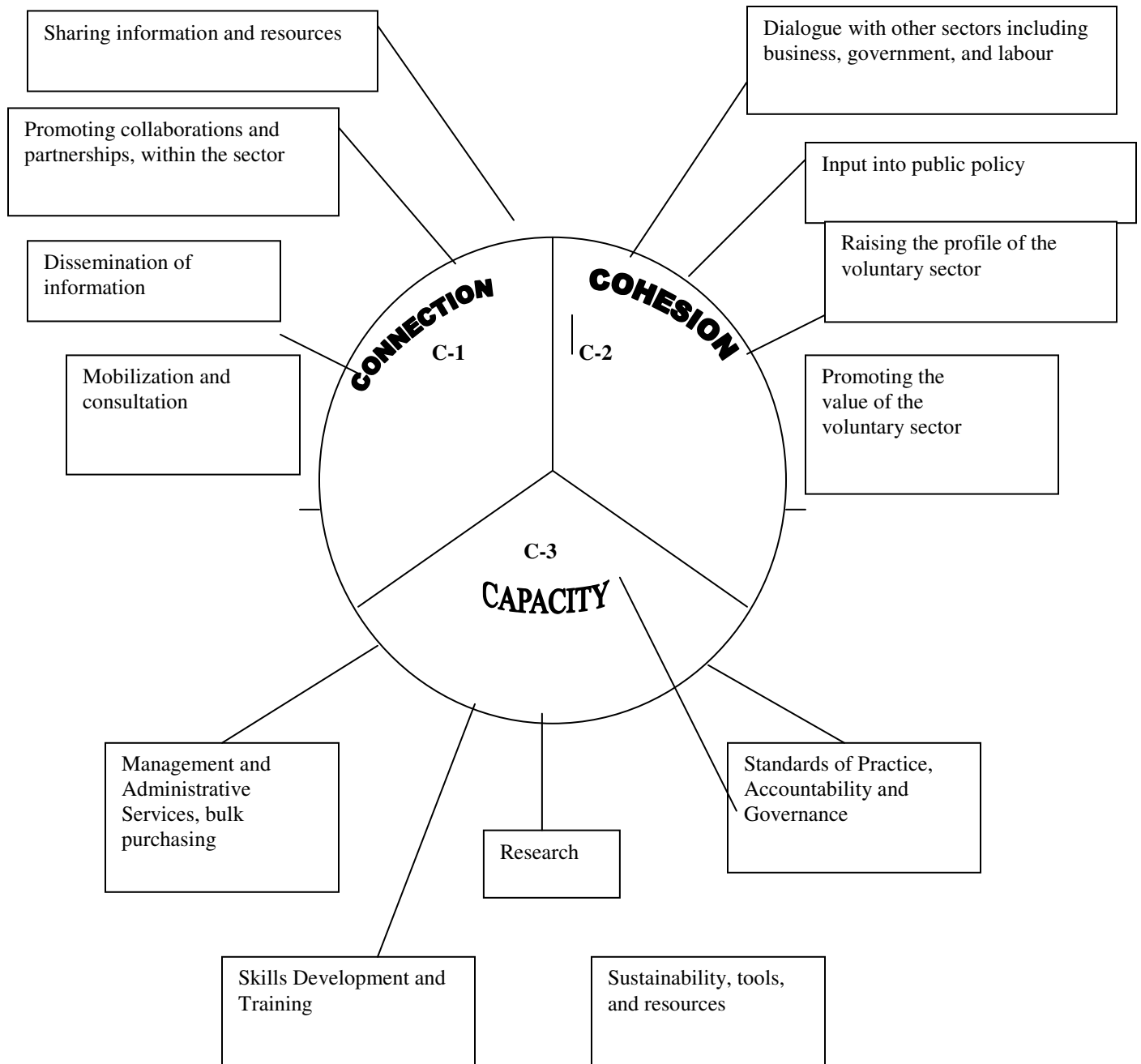
1. strengthen **connections** among voluntary organizations and practitioners *within* the voluntary sector;
2. create a **cohesive voice** for the voluntary sector to interact with other sectors; and
3. build the **capacity** of voluntary organizations and the voluntary sector, as a whole.

Since the creation of the Federation, many of the emerging networks have had formal launches, secured funding, and established significant constituencies. Still, there exists a wide range in terms of the stage of development, nature, and capacity of the various networks. Additionally, the informal, consensus-based model of establishing links between the networks has been challenged by the imperative to interact collectively with other (national) initiatives and leadership organizations, to define shared work, and to develop a more comprehensive outreach and capacity building strategy. A Federation task group is currently looking at a Diverse and Distributive Leadership model that can provide a framework working together, making decisions, and identifying principles of engagement with others. (See www.cvsrd.org/Federation for more information on Federation members)

3-C Model for Voluntary Sector Networks: Building Connection, Cohesion, and Capacity

Links Within the Sector

A voice outside the sector



Strength and vitality
June 2004

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The model is circular to illustrate the interconnectedness of these three components. It is also sectional to allow for the customization of the graphic to reflect the particular emphasis a network may have on one component, at a given point in time.

C -1 CONNECTIONS: (Internal) Links Within the Voluntary Sector

This component deals with connections among voluntary organizations and practitioners and speaks to the internal links within the voluntary sector. It involves all levels of interaction that can be facilitated through connection including: a) the sharing of information and resources; b) the promotion of collaboration and partnerships among voluntary organizations; c) the dissemination of information; and d) the mobilization and consultation of voluntary organizations. This interaction occurs through the informal discussions that take place during the breaks of events, through the technology developed to facilitate connections, and through structured events around specific issues.

C-2 COHESION: (External) A Voice Outside the Sector

Creating a cohesive voice for the voluntary sector in order to interact with other sectors includes: a) dialogue with other sectors, including business, government, and labour; b) having input into public policy; c) raising the profile of the voluntary sector; and d) promoting the value of the voluntary sector. This component is achieved through building relationships with sector counterparts, convening multi-sector dialogues, undertaking public relations initiatives, based on solid research, and monitoring, and responding to social trends and legislative developments.

C-3 CAPACITY: (Foundational) Strengthening Voluntary Organizations and the

Voluntary Sector as a whole involves: a) Management Services; b) Standards of Practice and Training; c) Sustainability; d) Research and e) Accountability and Governance. This component can be carried out through connections with other voluntary organizations and practitioners (C-1) or through programs and services of the network. This can include making resources accessible

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through technology and other means, organizing workshops, promoting national and international codes, or developing tools and resources. It is also achieved through the cohesive voice (C-2), as the public becomes more aware of the value of the voluntary sector, and as relationships with other sectors are strengthened.

Other Cohesive Voice Models (Sub-sector/Constituency Based)

What makes a voice authentic and legitimate? What is the process for determining what is given voice? Do you raise issues or take positions? What structures, processes, and protocols have successful coalitions, networks, councils, and alliances found effective? The National Children's Alliance and the Health Charities Council of Canada are two examples of sub-sector and constituency-based networks that have successfully engaged, mobilized, and articulated a cohesive voice in the public policy arena.

National Children's Alliance (text provided by Dianne Bascombe, Executive Director)

The National Children's Alliance is a group of over sixty national organizations committed to the well-being of all children and youth in Canada. Together, the member groups of the Alliance represent hundreds of thousands of people who work with children and families in the fields of social services, health and education, as professionals and as volunteers. National organizations conducting research as well as groups in the areas such as environment, literacy, housing and early childhood development are also part of the Alliance. Over the past two years the Alliance has worked specifically on policy development around early childhood, healthy active living, aboriginal children as well as accountability and monitoring.

The National Children's Alliance has been highly successful in impacting public policy. This is due to the levels of engagement, participation and the contributions of the member organizations and individuals involved. As a collective, the Alliance uses creative ways of working, remaining nimble and responsive, building on existing strengths of its constituency and maximizing limited resources. It has developed a unique style of leadership that has been a key factor in its success. The model of shared leadership extends to its external relations based on: active participation in decision-making processes; commitment to consensus as the basis of policy advocacy; transparency and openness in all decision-making; and, maintaining a balance of leadership and process. (See www.nationalchildrensalliance.ca)

Strengthening Canada's Health System (Description from HCCC's web-site_

Other than the economy, no issue stirs Canadian passions more than health care. We define ourselves as a country in large part through our universal health care system.

In the years to come, Canada's health system will continue to undergo massive change and restructuring from coast to coast to coast. Everyone - consumers, communities, national health charities, health professionals, employers and legislators - has a stake in ensuring that all policies result in the delivery of the best possible and most appropriate programmes and services to Canadians.

Working Together for Positive Change

National health charities have joined forces to advocate positive change in public policy. Established in June 2000, the Health Charities Council of Canada (HCCC) represents national health charities of all sizes. Member organizations bring together a wealth of knowledge, expertise, experience and resources, all of which improve the health of Canadians and strengthen Canada's health system.

Individually and now collectively, national health charities make significant contributions in key areas of health including:

- Research
- Information/surveillance
- Community/patient support

Research represents hope. Hope to finding clues to help make people's lives easier and ultimately, to find a cure. National health charities invest approximately \$300 million annually in health research in the quest for scientific answers and breakthroughs. They develop quality educational materials, programs and activities to help Canadians maintain and improve their health and prevent disease. Across the country, national health charities comprise hundreds of staff and millions of volunteers who serve Canadians in their communities year-round.

Moving the National Health Agenda Forward

The HCCC provides a strong voice on common interests in areas of shared concern. It acts as a resource to member organizations and facilitates networking opportunities. Because of the close ties between national health charities and Canadians, the HCCC can ensure that the concerns of the people of Canada, about health and the health system, are heard by policy and decision-makers. Through its member organizations, the HCCC is committed to strengthening the health system and to increasing the voluntary health sector's ability to monitor and influence public policy. For the benefit of all Canadians, the Council also seeks to increase health research funding in Canada and, ultimately, to enhance the overall health of the people of Canada.

(See www.hccc.ca)

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What might be some of the issues that have both a national scope and Pan-Canadian resonance?

What issues span the sub—sectors and constituent-groups? There are those *public good issues* that are related to the quality of life of Canadians and community vitality, about which the voluntary sector is playing a critical role, has valuable assets to contribute, and has direct knowledge of the impact on citizens such as:

- The municipal agenda
- Renewed relationships between the Federal Government, Provinces, and Territories
- Community-building
- Social Economy
- Social Inclusion
- Innovation

There is a separate set of *voluntary sector-specific issues* that ought to also enter into public policy dialogue such as the value of the voluntary sector, the critical role it plays in a democracy, the sustainability and capacity of the voluntary sector, and the relationship between the voluntary sector and governments. One might argue that both are, in fact, public good issues.

Language becomes important in these discussions. Are we talking about a voice that is *national* or *Pan-Canadian* in scope? Are we talking about something that is *centrally directed* or *jointly co-ordinated*? Can we create a strong, unified, and broadly recognized voice without becoming elitist, disconnected, and self-promoting? Are we ready to share leadership, resources, and power?