

Policy Internships and Fellowships Program  
Final Report

**Valuing Difference and Creating Connections:  
The Importance of the Voluntary Sector to Federal Policy  
Development**

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March 2004

This report follows the outline and guiding questions kindly provided by PIAF program organizers.

**The Home Organization: Social Policy Unit, Community Initiatives and Policy Directorate, BC/Yukon Region, Human Resources Development Canada.**

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) was formed in 1993 with the amalgamation of five federal departments, including the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission, Labour Canada, and parts of Health and Welfare Canada and the Secretary of State Department.

In late 2003, the department was split into two entities: Human Resources and Skills Development, and Social Development. Until this split is fully implemented, the mission of HRDC remains to enable Canadians to participate fully in the workplace and the community. HRDC has served as the cornerstone of the Government of Canada's social development agenda by offering programs and services that touch the lives of over nine million Canadians annually. This work includes: income security for seniors and persons with disabilities (Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security, the Government of Canada's Disability Agenda, etc); the opportunity to fully participate in the workplace and community (Employment Insurance, Canada Student Loans, the National Homelessness Initiative, and literacy and training programs, for example); and safe, fair, stable and productive workplaces (*Canada Labour Code* for federally regulated workplaces).

The department has also played, with provinces and territories, an important role in developing and maintaining Canada's social programs. HRDC is the federal department responsible for social portfolios such as the Social Union Framework Agreement, the financial well-being of seniors in retirement, the National Children's Agenda (with Health Canada), and social inclusion and anti-poverty work.

**The Social Policy Unit** in the BC/Yukon Region fosters relationships internally at HRDC with our program colleagues at regional headquarters and with field staff, as well as horizontally with other government departments. Externally we work with community stakeholders and through inter-governmental partnerships to establish connections and networks as well as to build strong relationships with our partners. The Unit is responsible for a number of social policy files including: literacy and learning; issues relevant to persons with disabilities; social inclusion and poverty; gender-based analysis; and the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), among others. More information about HRDC is available at: [www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/).

**The Host Organization: Research and Program Department of the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC)**

SPARC BC was founded in 1966 to provide a provincial voluntary sector voice on social policy and planning issues in the province of British Columbia. Its mission is to work with communities in building a just and healthy society for all. To achieve its mission, SPARC BC conducts social policy research and public education and promotes community development. SPARC BC also manages the Parking Permit Program - which issues, to persons with disabilities, permits to park in designated spaces - and promotes community-accessible environments. A provincially focused non-profit organization with a Board of Directors that seeks to reflect provincial diversity, SPARC BC has over 14,000 members. SPARC BC is incorporated under the B.C. *Society Act*, and is also a federally registered charity.

**The Research and Program Department** at SPARC BC conducts in-house research promoting income security, with a focus on adequate social assistance, affordable housing, and adequate distribution of income and services. The Unit also focuses on issues pertinent to persons with disabilities (in cooperation with the Parking Permit Department) and on community development, including community social planning. The Department also provides high-quality research and consulting services to community groups, governments and other agencies. Recent and current projects include:

- Ongoing support to the Community Social Planning Network of BC (CSPN BC) to facilitate local and provincial activity focused on social planning in BC
- Facilitation of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness
- Survey of Food Bank Users, part of a larger study examining food bank usage as an indicator of economic insecurity
- Living with Disabilities on Income Assistance (LiDIA), a research project designed to compare income assistance (BC welfare) provisions for persons with disabilities to the costs of living with a disability
- Community Development Education, a program that provides community development education and support resources throughout BC but especially to rural, isolated and northern communities, at low or moderate cost
- Retreat from Equality, a collaborative research project with the women's community, examining the ways in which provincial government cuts to programs and services are having a disproportionately negative impact on women.

The Research and Program Department's research products are made widely available to the voluntary, business and government sectors, for use in awareness raising, public education and advocacy activities. More information about SPARC BC is available at: [www.sparc.bc.ca/](http://www.sparc.bc.ca/).

### **Introduction: Myself, the PIAF Match, and the Assignment at SPARC BC**

I have worked for over 20 years with the federal government, most recently with HRDC. My "home" position as a Social Policy Consultant has, happily for me, been one of constant growth and learning. I have worked in the areas of Intergovernmental Relations, Aboriginal special projects, and Social Policy; with community, federal, provincial and Aboriginal counterparts; and on homelessness research, labour market negotiations, and the Voluntary Sector Initiative, among others topics.

Prior to joining HRDC, I worked with the Secretary of State Department, in program delivery and policy, liaising with communities in southern, central and northern BC. This was social change-focused community development work. Support was provided to voluntary sector organizations through funding delivery, technical assistance, and policy development. Prior to joining the federal government I worked with non-profit organizations in international development, community legal information, and with migrants and fruit pickers in BC's Okanagan Valley.

Non-paid or volunteer work has also been a constant source of learning and connection in my life. I remain involved with the voluntary sector in neighbourhood and social issue groups, in capacities ranging from distribution of leaflets to research and writing, and board duties and other committee work.

I hold a Master's degree in Community and Regional Planning from the University of British Columbia.

### **Interest in PIAF and Arranging the PIAF Match**

PIAF is viewed within the Social Policy Unit as a major learning opportunity for government and an excellent career development opportunity for staff members. I am the second member of the Unit to participate, following my colleague Janice Nelson's PIAF assignment with First Call<sup>1</sup> in 2002-03. The PIAF match arose from my assessment, accepted by management and mirrored by SPARC BC, of the similarity of the work and the complementary of the roles of HRDC's Social Policy Unit and SPARC BC's Research and Program Department.

### **The Assignment at SPARC BC**

My assignment with SPARC BC began on October 1, 2003 and ended on March 31, 2004. My desire was to join the day-to-day work of the Research and Program Department, working with as many members of the department as possible and on as wide a variety of issues and projects as possible. After many years with government, I wanted to re-experience life in the voluntary sector as a member of the paid workforce, in addition to my ongoing work as a volunteer.

The initial work objectives were developed in the spring of 2003 and addressed coalition and network building, specifically with the Community Social Planning Network of BC (CSPN BC), and in the area of community development education. Upon my arrival in October, my objectives were refined to focus on community development, policy research, and public policy issues in the voluntary sector. To this end, and working with existing SPARC BC staff teams, I was to:

- Support community committees (such as the CSPN BC Steering Committee)
- Design and implement research methodology, such as in the Living with Disabilities on Income Assistance project
- Design and implement mechanisms for local participation in public policy discussions (in the Inclusive Cities project)
- We also identified a mirror objective for SPARC BC: to enhance its connections with the Social Policy Unit.

### **Environmental Context during the Placement: Change is the Constant**

Context is important, and my workplan evolved in response to a number of environmental changes. At SPARC BC, a significant delay in the start of the Inclusive Cities project, due to external forces, effectively precluded my involvement. Further, in the face of continuing and massive provincial government cuts to the "social economy" or voluntary sector social service agencies, and to government-delivered services as well, the importance of community social planning became

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<sup>1</sup> First Call is a coalition of community groups advocating on children and youth issues in BC.

central to my assignment. As just one example of the scope of these cuts, most women's centres and non-profit providers of women's services face large (in many cases 100%) reductions in their provincial funding as of March 31, 2004. Work on enhancing SPARC BC connections with the Social Policy Unit was also sidelined, for a number of reasons. However, these changes collectively afforded me the time to participate in other activities, including SPARC BC's annual planning exercise, and development of a one-day training session introducing social planning, initially for communities in the Lower Mainland.

### **Reflections on the SPARC BC Assignment: "On the Ground" Learning and More Experience in Analysis and Negotiation**

My assignment at SPARC BC has been extremely enjoyable, characterized by a warm reception, stimulating work assignments, and a collegial work environment. I have been privileged to be involved in almost every aspect of work in the Research and Program Department, including meetings of the Board and with staff in the annual planning exercise. I will discuss in the limited space available three of the projects I worked on, and provide observations about SPARC BC's annual planning process.

#### Community Social Planning Network of BC

I particularly enjoyed supporting the Steering Committee of the Community Social Planning Network of BC. The CSPN BC was established in 2001 so that community social planning organizations could work together to share resources and information, promote understanding of community social planning among decision makers and the general public, and encourage research on issues touching community development and social planning. The Steering Committee, similar in structure and mandate to a board, is made up of representatives from established social planning organizations around BC willing to assume a leadership role in the Network.

In the autumn of 2003, the Steering Committee was ready to formalize annual planning for the Network, and to establish a more clearly articulated set of activities for the upcoming year. There was also a need to regularize the relationship with SPARC BC, which serves simultaneously as one of the five members of the Steering Committee and as the Network's Administrator. The upshot was the development of two important documents for the Network: its first annual or operational plan, and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Steering Committee and SPARC BC. I was able to draft, revise and see implemented, with significant support from the Steering Committee, the Operational Plan for 2004-05, which outlines work objectives for the Network for the upcoming year and also establishes an annual planning cycle and framework for future annual planning. I was also able to negotiate and see adopted the MoU, which commits to paper a number of agreements about the respective roles and responsibilities of the Steering Committee and SPARC BC as its Administrator. This document also served to clarify the values and principles underpinning the Network and its role and direction. The process of developing, revising and coming to agreement on these two documents was an excellent exercise in negotiation as well as in "word-smithing", both of which are essential skills in policy development. Further, becoming acquainted with the members of the Steering Committee was a real asset, as collectively they possess a sizeable chunk of established knowledge and skills in social planning across BC. More information about the Network is available at: [www.sparc.bc.ca/social\\_planning\\_network/index.html](http://www.sparc.bc.ca/social_planning_network/index.html).

#### Living with Disabilities on Income Assistance (LiDIA)

The LiDIA project had come into existence because persons with disabilities currently comprise a large proportion of BC income assistance (welfare) recipients. Additionally, a sizeable number of SPARC BC members are persons with disabilities, as well as holders of parking permits under the SPARC BC Parking Permit Program for persons with mobility impairments. SPARC BC produces annual or biannual reports comparing BC income assistance provisions to living costs for various types of family units.<sup>2</sup> However, the adequacy of BC income assistance provisions for persons with disabilities has not been explored, due to challenges associated with the complexity of the research design. This pilot research project will test a method of comparing living costs unique to persons with disabilities with benefits available under BC's *Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act* and *Employment and Assistance Act*.

During my tenure, the project team was wrestling with methodological issues in the design of the research. Work focused on: how to respectfully and most effectively involve those directly affected by the issue, that is, persons with disabilities getting by on income assistance; identifying certain non-profit organizations as partners in the research project and then negotiating the partnership; and choosing among qualitative research methodologies. To formulate a reliable and defensible research plan our considerations included: interviews with income assistance recipients with disabilities; interviews with "key informants" (such as staff of organizations of persons with disabilities, or providers of services to persons with disabilities); and literature and document reviews. Involvement with this project gave me the opportunity to refresh my analytical skills in research design, and to renew my acquaintance with issues facing persons with disabilities, particularly those relating to income security.

### Social Planning Training

The project to develop a training session introducing social planning for communities in Greater Vancouver evolved into a larger time commitment than originally foreseen. However, I found that the research work needed in order to compile material for the social planning presentations, identify resource persons to participate in various facilitated sessions, and develop a geographically and socially diverse invitation list complemented nicely my other work with the CSPN BC. The training objectives included: provision of stimulating presentations; creation of new social planning interpersonal connections, for attendees and resource people alike; and increased individual and organizational capacity to understand, include and carry out social planning in their communities. Involvement with this project served to increase my understanding of community social planning as it operates "on the ground" in Greater Vancouver.

### Annual Planning Process

One of the most informative aspects of my involvement with SPARC BC was the opportunity to observe and learn from the annual planning process. I was privileged to attend, with other staff members, two of the Board's day-and-a-half long meetings to develop and then finalize annual goals and objectives. I was also included in all of the many staff meetings to mold a workable annual plan consistent with the ambitious and broad-ranging direction set by the Board. The two points which stood out for me were: (1) the respect for democratic functioning evidenced in the way the organization gives central importance to policy direction provided by the Board; and

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<sup>2</sup> Andrea Long, and Michael Goldberg, *Falling Further Behind: A Comparison of Living Costs and Employment and Assistance Rates in British Columbia* (Vancouver: SPARC BC, December 2002). This most recent example of a SPARC BC comparative study is available online at: [http://www.sparc.bc.ca/research/falling\\_further\\_behind.pdf](http://www.sparc.bc.ca/research/falling_further_behind.pdf).

(2) staff professionalism, in the form of patience, good group process and creativity, throughout this always-laborious process.

### **Voluntary Sector-Public Sector Comparison in Policy: More Alike Than You Think**

The two units, the Social Policy Unit in the BC/Yukon Region of HRDC and the Research and Program Department at SPARC BC, are even more alike than I had initially understood. It is a given that both are policy units with a focus on social issues, and it was on this premise that the PIAF match was arranged. Further, both are small shops, comprising fewer than ten staff members. Both emphasize building extra-agency connections and a collegial and learning-oriented intra-agency work environment. Both are unionized, working with relative comfort within the confines and advantages of collective agreements, and both search for staff members who can take on a variety of roles, including researcher, skilled communicator, planner, resource person and facilitator.

What has more recently come into focus for me is that both are more unlike than like any other comparable units in their respective sectors. There is no exact equivalent to the Social Policy Unit in a regional office of HRDC anywhere else in the country. Similarly, there is no exact equivalent (within the voluntary sector) to SPARC BC's Research and Program Department, although aspects are similar to parts of other non-profit organizations such as the Canadian Council on Social Development or the BC branch of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Further, both units continually strive to refine their mandates, in the face of somewhat amorphous objectives and in the context of continual assessment of who is their "client". In effect, their uniqueness makes them both pioneers, pathfinders and innovators within their respective sectors.

However, the two units differ in one important aspect: the ability to access and interpret direction provided by the elected leadership. At SPARC BC, the Board, elected by the membership, is active and involved; it provides broad policy direction for the organization, including the social policy work of the Research and Program Department. Federal politicians, elected by the public to the House of Commons, provide policy direction for HRDC, and very indirectly, through a number of layers of the bureaucracy, the Social Policy Unit. It is the immediacy and accessibility of direction from the leadership at SPARC BC versus the filtering and layers of re-interpretation (of direction) for the Social Policy Unit that present such a contrast in how social policy work is defined and organized.

### **The Voluntary and Public Sectors as Partners in Public Policy: Still a Long Way to Go**

Somewhat surprisingly, in response to the question regarding learnings about the voluntary sector's role in public policy development, posed by program organizers to all PIAF participants, there were no major revelations for me from this assignment. Rather, previous observations - about the importance to Canadian society of the voluntary sector, the importance of resourcing the sector, and the importance of advocacy work by charities and other non-profit organizations - were reinforced and refined.

First, the voluntary sector remains an essential pillar in Canadian society. One illustrative example is provided by voluntary sector women's service and women's equality-seeking groups, which have worked tirelessly to improve the lot of women and to seek equality for all in Canada. As stated in a recent speech by the Honourable Claire L'Heureux-Dubé, former judge of Canada's Supreme Court: "In Canada, thanks in large part to the vision and strategy of women's groups, the constitutionalization of equality has played a large part in bringing about such a transformation.

Furthermore, the Canadian experience also suggests that when women help to forge and shape the development of constitutional guarantees of equality, these norms have the potential to provide one of the most powerful means available for making equality a reality for all.”<sup>3</sup>

The contributions of women's groups are just one example of the importance of the voluntary sector to Canadian society. Yet these contributions are being seriously eroded by funding cuts from all levels of government, notably to women's groups and services by the BC provincial government. The valuable role played by the voluntary sector in government policy development at all levels will be seriously undercut if this erosion continues.

Second, as the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) report<sup>4</sup> confirms, funding *does* matter. Adequate core funding, especially for social service delivery, but also for advocacy and social change work, is essential. Some of the non-profit organizations I encountered in my work with SPARC BC were struggling to avoid “mandate drift” due to funding challenges, despite their obvious effectiveness and efficiency. As Juillet et al.<sup>5</sup> note: “... organizations that we investigated reported feeling under pressure to make changes and to adapt to new funding realities. At the same time, it was quite clear that the organizations also resisted these changes. The resilience of these organizations needs to be included in our understanding of the non-profit sector as do the pressures for change.”

Third, the voluntary sector, as viewed through involvement with SPARC BC, continues as a major player in policy development. It contributes not only as sensing mechanism for social issues or as a “social seismograph”, but also as researcher, analyst, writer, community voice and partner for government. One of its most socially important roles, for both government and society, is that of advocacy, despite challenges to this reality. The biggest issue left unresolved from the work of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, to my mind, continues to be that of protecting advocacy work by charities, which comprise a significant portion of the voluntary sector.

As the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS) states<sup>6</sup>: “the advocacy rules impede critical public policy debates by preventing the full participation of charitable organizations, which often possess great expertise and understanding in their fields of endeavour. This loss of informed voices is particularly problematic at a time when the relationships between public, private, and voluntary sectors are in fundamental change. It can be argued that these rules in effect impede the freedom of expression of charitable organizations – a freedom enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.”

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<sup>3</sup> Claire L’Heureux-Dubé, “It Takes a Vision: The Constitutionalization of Equality in Canada” (p. 21), an address to the West Coast LEAF Equality Breakfast, Vancouver, March, 5, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Scott, *Funding Matters: The Impact of Canada’s New Funding Regime on Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003). Available online at: [www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2003/fm/summary-fundingmatters.pdf](http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2003/fm/summary-fundingmatters.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Luc Juillet, Caroline Andrew, Tim Aubry, and Janet Mrenica, “The Impact of Changes in Funding Environment on Nonprofit Organizations”, to be published in *The Nonprofit Sector in Canada* (working title), K. Banting and K. Brock, eds. (Kingston: Queen’s-McGill University Press), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bridge, *The Law of Advocacy by Charitable Organizations: The Case for Change* (Vancouver: IMPACS, 2000), pp.1-2. Available online at: [www.impacs.org/index.cfm?group\\_ID=2857](http://www.impacs.org/index.cfm?group_ID=2857).

On the question, posed by program organizers to PIAF participants, about effectively engaging the voluntary sector in public policy development, others in this year's PIAF report will likely comment at greater length on the value of meaningful and honest consultation as part of ongoing relationship building between government and the voluntary sector. I will limit my comments to saying that (1) elected officials and public servants must get past the tug for "consultation for appearance" and (2) voluntary sector representatives must behave not just as stakeholders but as citizens, and thus demand, despite the challenges, the best from government in terms of listening to and working with citizens, individually as well as collectively (when organized as the voluntary sector).

The PIAF program has proven invaluable in refining my understanding of these important aspects of the voluntary sector-public sector relationship in policy development. The contacts, skills and knowledge I developed while working at SPARC BC will enrich my work upon my return to the federal government. Most of all, the PIAF experience has reconfirmed my view of the importance of the voluntary sector to federal policy development.