

## **Update – Rethinking Nonprofit Ontario**

**From Lynn Eakin, Lynn Eakin and Associates**

In the fall of 2006, with the support of an Innovation Fellowship from the Metcalf Foundation, I researched and circulated a paper “*Advancing the Nonprofit Sector*”. The paper explored the experiences of the nonprofit sector across Canada and in other jurisdictions to identify the promising strategies of successful sector-wide organizing efforts. The research found – independent (non-government) funding, cross sector involvement, experienced volunteer and staff leadership, and an open functional structure were key characteristics. Based on these findings, I proposed that a well organized non-profit voice in Ontario with these characteristics would be better able to engage with Government and the public on key sector wide issues more effectively than sub-sectors and other groups working in isolation.

The paper was circulated widely to individuals and sub-sector organizations and their associations. It was received with interest by many and I began the second phase of the project – to speak with key people in the various sub-sectors to gauge their interest in exploring how to move forward, and to identify compelling cross sector issues that could galvanize the sector. Previous organizing efforts in the sector had failed in generating and sustaining a functional network so it is critically important another attempt should be successful.

The more people I spoke with the less clear the way forward appeared to be. This is what I have found:

- While everyone I spoke with thought a strong organized nonprofit voice might be helpful to address sector wide issues and raise the profile of the sector it was not at the top of anybody’s agenda.
- The galvanizing cross sector issues were not gripping or immediately clear. I consulted primarily with social service, arts and environmental sectors. They all felt the nonprofit sector did not get the respect or financing it deserved and they all agreed that the sector was a critical component of a healthy Ontario; this however did not translate into a strong cross cutting agenda.
- I found each sector deeply and passionately involved with their mission which, of course, is exactly what makes the nonprofit sector so effective and unique. Leaders in the various sectors could not muster the same passion regarding cross sector issues.
- Moreover, as I tried to source start-up funding and identify leadership it began to feel as if creating a sector umbrella voice would be yet another nonprofit organization preoccupied with securing operating funds, conforming to a host of constraining and diverting obligations and tackling issues that when removed from the grassroots ceased to compel.

## A Second Look

Stepping back to take another look at our Ontario non-profit sector I noted the following:

- There are few inter-sector connectors between the arts, environment and social services. Innovations or effective problem-solving in one sector are generally unknown to the other sectors.
- There is no reliable method of distributing messages and materials across the sub-sectors. We cannot effectively or reliably communicate amongst ourselves.
- People do not know each other. There are few opportunities to develop cross sector relationships and no way to track developments in the various sub-sectors that might have broader resonance across the nonprofit sector.

Based on these findings, it should be no surprise that the sub-sectors do not see a nonprofit sector umbrella organization as a compelling priority. There is no sense of shared agenda among the social service, environment and arts sectors even though, as they identified, they share a commitment to the public good and a pervasive sense that they are poorly understood and often under appreciated by the larger society.

Does this mean there is no shared agenda in the nonprofit sector? We will not know until there is more interchange and communication across the sub-sectors and in some cases within sub-sectors . It may well be more effective for sub-sectors to pursue their agendas in their own unique ways than trying to craft a single common agenda. Take, for example, the lack of serious ongoing media coverage of the sector, an issue commonly acknowledged throughout the nonprofit sector. Everyone agrees the current coverage consisting of periodic “charity scandals” and “human interest” stories is woefully inadequate. However, while the problem is shared, the strategies of how to address the issue and the desired outcomes for each sector are different. Coordinated, parallel initiatives may be more powerful and successful and will save the tremendous energy and time that would be needed to achieve consensus across the non-profit sector for a common campaign.

## Coordinated, Parallel Voices

Based on my interviews with a wide variety of key informants across the nonprofit sector in Ontario, I have shifted my view on how best to harness the strength and potential of the nonprofit sector. Coordinated, parallel initiatives, to address common cause has the potential, I believe, to be both more effective and more in tune with how the sector operates. Moreover, it has the added benefit of not over simplifying the sector but allowing it to reflect all its complexities.

As a sector we need to be “response ready” with the social capital cross-sector to be able to mobilize when galvanizing and important issues emerge. However coordinated and parallel initiatives cannot not happen until there are connections and information flowing between the various sub-sectors. We need to build those connections and relationships. The added bonus is we will also be building cross-sector fertilization as the sectors, with their different cultures and approaches, learn from each other.

- To start, we need facilitated networking opportunities providing information exchange and supporting connections across and between sectors. In the early stages, a network facilitator would need to actively network across the sectors to track, and capture sub-sector activity with cross sector appeal.
- We need to develop the sector's capacity to communicate across the various sub-sectors by tapping into existing sub-sector communication channels. As relationships develop cross sector exchange will happen and cross sector collaborative action/advocacy can emerge.
- The network will also function, as required, to steer the broader community - policy makers, funders, media etc. to the appropriate sector sources.
- While much can be done over the internet with blogs, list-serves, e-bulletins, and the like, periodic Nonprofit Ontario conferences focused on current and emerging issues would allow sector leaders to learn from each other, craft complementary activities and initiatives, and coordinate strategies.

## **The Next Step**

I now believe we need to proactively build a cross-sector network that will allow us to reach all those in the nonprofit sector working for the public good. The network, especially in the initial phase, will need to be actively developed and will therefore require some independent financing. A cross-sector work group will be needed to advise and guide network building by guiding the mapping of sector communication channels, identifying current and emerging issues within sectors and assisting with the cross sector translation and communication of promising change strategies.

Would you like to be involved? Do you have thoughts or ideas about how to build an "action ready" network across the nonprofit sector? Please call or e-mail me.

Lynn Eakin 416-961-3924, [lynn@lynneakin.com](mailto:lynn@lynneakin.com)