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## **Policy Partnerships: Essential Elements Of EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT/NGO Relationships: A Brief Review of Recent Literature**

### **Abstract and Introduction**

Interest in policy partnerships in Canada has increased over the past decade as governments have reduced core funding to volunteer organizations and looked to community partners to undertake a greater share of service delivery as well as contribute increasingly to policy development. (Phillips 1995; Ekos 1998) Governments, public interest groups and citizens have also been looking for new ways of obtaining input to the development of public policy in an increasingly pluralistic society empowered by new communications technologies.

This paper<sup>1</sup> presents a brief synopsis of some of the literature on partnerships with a particular focus on partnerships between governments and non-governmental or voluntary sector organizations. It provides an overview of some of the key elements of partnerships, potential contributions to the public policy discourse by voluntary sector partners, limitations to full partnerships, potential pitfalls and keys to successful partnerships. It also presents a brief overview of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, a Canadian partnership initiative that reveals some of the potential and challenges in government/voluntary sector partnerships. The paper draws heavily upon an extensive literature review conducted in 1998 by Ekos Research Associates. It draws, as well, on other works referenced here.

### **Partnerships Defined**

A partnership may be defined simply as 'a collaborative venture between two or more organizations that pool resources in pursuit of common objectives'. In law it generally implies a sharing of risks and rewards. Members of a partnership retain their separate identity but are committed to ensuring that the "whole is greater than the sum of its parts". (Cecchini, et. al. 2000:7)

"Partnership implies a voluntary collaboration between two or more organizations to achieve clearly identified goals. (Tojman 1998:2) It "represents to all partners a *better* strategy to address a specific project or goal than each partner operating independently...to add value [*synergistically*] to the efforts of individual partners." (Ekos 1998:6) "Pooling resources garners the biggest impact, increases the bottom line, expands the reach of projects, and can enhance an organization's image and credibility." (Mintz, et. al. 1998:10) "The voluntary sector, and partnerships in particular, can help complement public policy with an on-the-ground approach that seeks local and immediate solutions to economic and social problems...Voluntary action is a complement and supplement to government regulation, [*proclamation or direct delivery*]." (Torjman 1998:4)

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Partnerships may encompass a broad array of arrangements that range on a continuum from informal associations or networks to formal legal agreements. "Partnerships are about power: individual and collective...strength, wisdom and ability. Power is always present and is rarely equal. A successful partnership values and openly acknowledges the different types of power that each individual or organization brings." (Frank and Smith 2000:15)

Partnerships between government and voluntary sector organizations have traditionally been largely, though not exclusively, limited to contracting for specific tasks. "This 'command and control' model of government, characterized by compartmentalized approaches, centralized systems, sharp divisions between service providers and recipients, and values of compliance and uniformity, is ill-suited to respond to the public's demand for more holistic, transparent and accessible government." (Armstrong 1999:18) This view of partnerships does not conform to the more rigorous criteria of 'true' partnerships enunciated below. Notwithstanding this critique, governments have a legitimate responsibility for contracting in this fashion for specific services and tasks. The increasing interest in 'policy partnerships' reflects an evolving reality.

### **Types of Partnerships**

Several partnership typologies have been developed around a number of different organizing concepts: purpose, power-sharing, type of funding partner and structure. (Ekos 1998:6) Torjman (1998) offers a typology based on the processes used by the members of a partnership. This typology has been adapted here for the purposes of this paper. *Consultative* relationships are established to seek advice or input from experts or the public with respect to problems, policy options or implementation of policies. *Operational* partnerships are work-sharing arrangements in which the components of a given task are delegated to specific parties. *Collaborative* partnerships are set up to share resources, risks and decision-making." (Torjman 1998:6)

"Four key elements distinguish and define (*true*) partnerships:

- Common objectives and goals
- Shared risk and mutual benefits
- Contributions from both (*all*) partners
- Shared authority, responsibility and accountability (*in and for decisions*)" (Ekos 1998:6)

Torjman (1998) suggests "there is no (*true*) partnership without a sharing of risk, responsibility, accountability and benefits." (p.3) Deakin (1997), commenting on the compact between government and the voluntary sector in Britain, says: "real partnership involves real consultation, not just on implementation but on objectives." He also says "the notion of partnership is in danger of being worn down to meaninglessness by endless repetition." (p.35)

"Pascal (1996), referring to relationships between government and non-governmental organizations, calls the term "government partnership" an oxymoron in light of the difficulty that governments frequently have in sharing power and decision-making. More frequently voluntary sector and government undertake "*relationships*" involving joint programming and consultations." (cited in Ekos 1998:6)

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The term 'partnerships' carries connotations that may, in fact, detract from our purpose; that is to examine means by which voluntary sector organizations and governments can strengthen their relationships (i.e. work together) in the interest of developing public policies that best reflect their mutual objectives. Pascal's description of the interaction between government and the voluntary sector as [*mutually beneficial*] 'relationships' rather than partnerships may be a more pragmatic characterization of how they can and do work together.

### **Voluntary Sector Accord in Canada**

Regardless of definitions, governments and voluntary sector organizations continue to strive for more formal frameworks upon which to build those relationships. The Voluntary Sector Accord (2001) in Canada is an example of such an attempt to develop new ways for government and the voluntary sector to work together. The 'Accord', accompanied by *Codes of Good Practice on 'Policy Dialogue' and 'Funding'* (2002), acknowledges the value of the voluntary sector and defines the values, principles and commitments intended to guide the relationship between it and the federal government.

"The purpose of the *Accord* is to strengthen the ability of both the voluntary sector and the Government of Canada to better serve Canadians. While the *Accord* is not a legal document, it represents a public commitment to more open, transparent, consistent and collaborative ways of working together. The strength of this *Accord* derives from the joint work that produced it." (Accord: 7) "The *Accord* recognizes that many voluntary sector organizations do not work directly with the Government of Canada but are affected by the regulatory, economic and social context it shapes. The *Accord*...outlines the values and principles that will govern the relationship when they choose to work together." (Accord: 4)

It values democracy, active citizenship, equality, diversity, inclusion and social justice. The Accord is based upon principles that recognize both the independence and interdependence of the parties and encourage dialogue, co-operation, collaboration and accountability. It also articulates their separate and shared commitments, "unique strengths and different ways of working." (Accord: 7)

The '*Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue*' distinguishes between Public Policy, Public Policy Dialogue and Public Policy Development. It acknowledges the important role that the voluntary sector plays "in helping the federal government identify issues and achieve its public policy objectives." (Code on Policy Dialogue: 6) The Code is based on principles of mutual respect, inclusiveness, accessibility, clarity, transparency, responsibility and accountability. It identifies the stages of the public policy process as issue identification, agenda setting, policy design, implementation, monitoring and impact assessment.

This code explicitly recognizes the crucial role of the sector in representing the views of its stakeholders, particularly otherwise powerless and minority voices. It values the wealth of unique abilities and experiences drawn from diverse backgrounds in voluntary organizations close to the experience, interests and concerns of their constituents. It also acknowledges their "role in raising awareness, building common ground and achieving consensus." It stresses the importance of "informal dialogue on a day-to-day basis as a vital dimension of the public policy process at all stages, especially *before* policy options...have been determined." (Code on Policy Dialogue: 4)

"The purpose of the '*Code of Good Practice on Funding*' is to guide interactions between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector on funding policies and practices. It is

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grounded in each sector's recognition of its responsibility to be accountable to Canadians and the importance of sustainable capacity to enable voluntary organizations to serve Canadians." (Code on Funding: 2) It acknowledges the value of the special perspective of the voluntary sector through its connection to communities, the sector's need for strengthened sustainable capacity, the importance of close collaboration with government, its unique capacity for creativity and innovation and its diversity and accessibility. It also recognizes the need for accountability, transparency, consistency, efficiency and effectiveness in all operations, expenditures and funding policies and practices.

### **The Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) – The Potential of Partnerships**

The process involved in developing the *Accord* and carrying out the VSI may be as close to a 'true' partnership between government and voluntary sector organizations as can be attained. The process began with the establishment in 1997 of the Voluntary Sector Roundtable (VSR), comprised of twelve national umbrella organizations. The 'Broadbent' Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector was commissioned in 1997 by the VSR and financed largely by foundation grants.

The Panel's report (February 1999) paved the way for "Working Together", a joint initiative with the Government of Canada, and funded by it. The purpose of this project was "to forge a more effective, strategic relationship to better serve Canadians. Joint Tables, composed equally of government officials and sector leaders, conducted exploratory talks in three key areas: building a new relationship, strengthening capacity, and improving the regulatory framework." (Working Together 1999: 9) Its work was completed between April and August 1999.

The Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) was launched in September 2000 with a commitment of \$94.6 million in federal funding over five years (including \$28.5 million to strengthen sector involvement in departmental policy development - SIDPD). "Government leadership of the VSI was provided by a reference group of ministers appointed by the Prime Minister and chaired by the President of the Treasury Board." (VSI website) An Assistant Deputy Ministers' committee led the work within the federal bureaucracy and coordinated with "a steering committee of senior voluntary sector members who provided leadership for the voluntary sector." (VSI website)

"The voluntary sector co-chairs of the joint tables, the chairs of sector-only working groups, representatives of the visible minorities and Aboriginal reference groups, and members of the Voluntary Sector Roundtable constituted the Voluntary Sector Steering Group. This group provided overall guidance and co-ordination of voluntary sector participation in the Initiative.

"The joint tables were:

- *Coordinating*: To provide overall coordination to the component initiatives/projects and "Joint Tables" of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, particularly for joint activities related to the harmonization of consultation, communication and research and provide overall coordination to the component initiatives/projects, particularly for joint activities related to the harmonization of consultation, communication and research.
- *Accord*: To develop a framework agreement to articulate the shared vision and principles for relations between the voluntary sector and the federal government.
- *Awareness*: To increase recognition of the sector among the public and government.

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- *Capacity*: To develop new knowledge, skills and means for voluntary organizations to respond to Canadians' needs.
  - *Information Technology and Information Management*: To improve the sector's access to the benefits of technology.
  - *Volunteerism*: To encourage more Canadians to volunteer with, participate in and contribute to voluntary organizations.
  - *Regulatory*: To streamline reporting requirements and regulations that affect the voluntary sector." (VSI website)

The joint tables operated more as 'true partnerships' when they were working on policy documents such as the Accord and the Codes. They functioned more in an advisory fashion when considering strategies that would involve commitment of government expenditures such as those required for expanding access to information technology or those involving legislative or regulatory changes such as charities and tax legislation.

"What made the VSI unique was that the two sectors – through the joint tables – were collaborating in virtually uncharted territory. No one had yet tried to make a joint process work in such a complex environment, one with so many disparate and sometimes contradictory interests. Directed only by a broad mandate ascribed by the federal government, the joint tables worked independently, developing a diverse range of creative processes and products in support of their goals." (VSI Story, 2003: 12)

The activities of the VSI were supported by two secretariats. One was located in the Privy Council Office to provide support to the Ministers and Assistant Deputy Ministers committees and coordinate VSI efforts and interests within and between government departments and the relationship with the voluntary sector. A second was established by the VSR, and housed by the Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations, to support and coordinate the activities and interests of voluntary sector participants. The two secretariats, in practice, worked very closely together to ensure overall coordination and management of their joint interests.

"The joint tables process provided a positive forum for representatives of the two sectors to demonstrate their commitment, work collaboratively and address difficult issues openly and respectfully. In an important sense, the process acted as a microcosm of the sectors' broader working relationship, reinforcing the potential for successful collaboration on complex and difficult issues.

"At the same time, however, the process highlighted some of the fundamental differences between the sectors – particularly in terms of their culture and ways of working. Bureaucratic and hierarchical, the federal government's work culture focuses strongly on ensuring accountability through deadlines and deliverables. This culture was sometimes at odds with that of the voluntary sector, with its predominantly "flat" structure, diverse membership and consensus-building approach. In many cases, these differences required that tables devote considerable energy "up front" to establish rapport, build trust and develop a common language and understanding of goals and objectives. In the end, participants from both sectors benefited from the process, gaining an enhanced appreciation of the constraints inherent in each other's cultures, structures and processes.

"Some of the VSI's most enduring legacies – and lessons – are the product of its innovative approach. Joint governance, loosely articulated lines of authority, and a broad-based and

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inclusive process – all of these factors contributed to the unique character of the VSI, as well as to its outcomes.” (VSI Story, 2003:12)

### **The Public Policy Discourse: Contributions and Limitations**

“Voluntary sector organizations that demonstrate credibility through sound governance, organizational stability and the capacity to bring informed expertise or opinion to policy discussions are more likely to exert effective influence on public policy development than those without such credibility.” (Edgar 2002:1) Assuming such credibility, the voluntary sector can bring to the public policy discourse:

- Knowledge of and connection (contacts) with community from a unique perspective
- Research, programmatic, scientific and policy expertise
- Networks for communication, dissemination and citizen engagement
- Commitment and passion for public interest causes
- Capacity for flexibility, responsiveness and innovation
- Credibility and public trust
- Clout, particularly through alliances and coalitions
- Broadened perspective, and
- Volunteer labour

However, the sector depends on governments for sixty percent of its revenues. (Panel on Accountability, 1999:13) Government/voluntary sector partnerships that are largely dependent on government funding tend to have power imbalances that, by necessity, place governments in a dominant role since they cannot delegate decision-making or accountability for expenditure of public funds. Governments are likely to be more averse to risk-taking, have more hierarchical and mandate-specific decision-making processes and have less flexibility, immediate response and innovative capacity than voluntary organizations. While this approach does not conform to the traditional definitions of partnerships reflected in the literature, governments, as the *Accord* acknowledges, have a super ordinate responsibility to ensure accountability for expenditure of public funds.

“Accountability requirements [*may*] become blurred within the complex nexus of decision-making and lines of authority that can evolve within a partnership. The holistic approach taken by many partnerships and the horizontal methods of addressing problems contrast directly with the vertical and single-issue reporting typical of most government departments.” (Torjman 1998: 15-16)

The purposes, potential pitfalls and keys to successful partnerships described here apply to partnerships between governments and voluntary sector organizations as well as to those between voluntary sector organizations themselves or those that might include stakeholders from other sectors such as labour and business.

### **Partnership Purposes**

Partnerships, like all relationships, are organic by nature. They evolve and change over time depending on the common interests or issues that bring partners together, the level of trust, the constellation of leadership and commitment at a particular moment, the immediacy of issues that are their focus, the resources that are available to support their efforts and the shifting priorities of the respective partners.

The purpose of a partnership may include one or more of the following:

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- Sharing information, ideas, insights, experiences and skills through a broader network than may be available to individual partners
  - Consultation on matters of common interest
  - Building consensus on matters of common interest
  - Partner, member, community or public education
  - Coordination of services, research, policy positions or advocacy
  - Achievement of more widespread reach than can be achieved by the partners independently
  - Division of tasks, responsibilities and resources in pursuit of mutually agreed goals
  - Accomplishment of objectives beyond the scope of individual partners
  - Generating greater effectiveness and strength through broader constituencies
  - Providing greater credibility and/or profile around a particular issue or cause
  - Increasing solidarity and mutual moral and psychological support among partners  
(adapted from Cecchini et. al. 2000:11)

### **Pitfalls in Partnerships**

Partnerships also carry certain pitfalls such as:

- Power imbalances
- Overreach resulting from overly ambitious or unrealistic objectives/expectations
- Conflicting or hidden agendas
- Difficulty in achieving consensus due to too disparate or too generic a membership
- Overly bureaucratized or cumbersome decision-making processes
- Overload of information or management infrastructure
- Compromise of the mission of individual organizational partners due to opportunistic funding or deep compromises
- Blurred lines of accountability  
(adapted from Cecchini et. al. 2000:11-12)

### **Keys to Successful Partnerships**

A number of steps have been identified in the literature that are essential to developing effective partnerships. Some of the most important of these are:

- Adopting a broad vision of policy and coordinating across policy fields and jurisdictions in order to balance a range of needs and interests.
- Selecting the right partners: It is important that voluntary sector networks, alliances or coalitions bring together the 'right' partners...that have sufficiently common interests, complementary skills and resources, and the potential to work together effectively and achieve consensus on objectives, strategies and tactics. It is similarly important for governments to select partners with objectives compatible with their own.
- Negotiating agreement upon goals, objectives, performance indicators, decision-making processes, risks and rewards.
- Joint or shared planning and management from conception to implementation.
- Focusing on outcomes: ensuring that the 'right' outcomes are sought and that results are evaluated.
- Establishment of clear roles, goals and expectations related to responsibilities for tasks and lines of accountability.

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- Establishment of clear expectations with respect to investment of resources and recognition of contributions.
  - Building trust: "The building blocks of trust are time, open communication and transparency." (Ekos 1998:25)
  - Achieving and recognizing early successes: It is important to start with limited objectives and build upon successful collaborative ventures to develop a sense of progress and momentum.
  - Monitoring results: Assessing achievement of results is essential to keeping the partnership 'on track' and adapting to changing circumstances.
  - Recognition of contributions: Giving credit where credit is due is critical to maintaining the commitment and motivation of partners.
  - Managing risks: Anticipating and diffusing potential risks to activities and objectives increases the likelihood of successful outcomes.
  - Managing conflict: Conflicts within partnerships, or for that matter any relationships, are inevitable. Constructive management of these, whether organizational, institutional or interpersonal is essential to growth of the partnership (relationship).
  - Compromise and ownership of outcomes: Partners must equally celebrate achievements and live with setbacks. They must be prepared to *appreciate rather than deride* 'half a loaf' (or even a slice) when a full loaf is not in the cards...but to do this without forsaking the quest for full achievement of objectives. They must avoid the 'look good, avoid blame' trap and avoid the blame game that endangers any partnership.
- (adapted from Ekos 1998: 20-26 and Armstrong 1999:5-6)

There are three other special challenges (*not directly addressed in the literature cited here but widely recognized in both sectors and validated by our own experience*) to establishing sound partnerships or 'mutually beneficial relationships' between voluntary sector organizations and government.

The first is the viability of voluntary sector organizations and umbrella groups. Effective partnerships require a degree of parity, equity and stability in both (all) partner organizations. Voluntary organizations that rely upon uncertain or tenuous project (rather than core) funding are at a substantial disadvantage in attempting to engage in the public policy discourse and influence public policy.

Secondly, 'forced marriages' between voluntary sector organizations (i.e. where funding is conditional on several organizations working together or obtaining revenue from alternate private sector or charitable sources) place undue strains and, often unrealistic, expectations on them. The history of such arrangements is, for the most part, one of limited success.

The third disadvantage emanates from the expectation that voluntary sector organizations will provide their unique, often professional, expertise and advice with no or limited financial support or individual compensation from governments while the latter may be prepared to pay, sometimes handsomely, for outside expertise from consultants. This can place a real strain on the relationship between the parties and creates a significant degree of resentment on the part of volunteers and voluntary sector organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Relationships between governments and voluntary sector organizations have traditionally been based on contractual models, often with voluntary organizations conducting work or implementing policies on behalf of governments. Greater consumer sophistication and



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organizational capacity (driven in part by increased access to information and technology), frustration with the traditional 'silo' approach to public policy development and administration, increased recognition of the strengths and contributions of the voluntary sector, and growing recognition of the potential benefits of broader citizen engagement in policy development have prompted an exploration of new models for strengthening the relationship between the sectors.

"The new politics calls for new skills---skills in building bridges and alliances, brokering interest, forging consensus, articulating shared values...[It] calls for the courage to take risks and to give up some degree of control---this is inevitable in citizen-based government, in the idea of partnership. The new politics calls for greater transparency, a serious commitment to accountability---for values and for results...[and] humility---a willingness to admit that our knowledge is imperfect, that we must continuously learn and improve, that we are all stronger together. The future will require governments centred on citizens. The future of governance is partnership and shared responsibility." (Masse, 1997)

However, effective voluntary sector input to the public policy discourse requires a strong and stable sector ...strength and stability it is unlikely to achieve without substantial and predictable levels of financial support from governments or other sources. While there is much to recommend solicitation of revenue sources independent of governments, the difficulties that voluntary sector organizations, particularly 'umbrella groups', have encountered in securing such alternate revenue sources have not been encouraging.

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**Interviews/Commentary on draft**

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