

# **Annex G**

**What Matters to Canadian NGOs on Aging:  
Reflections of the Five Dialogues Conducted between  
October 2001 and February 2002**



**CPRN RCRPP**

**Asking Canadian NGOs What Matters on Aging**

**Reflections on the Five Dialogues Conducted Between  
October 2001 and February 2002**

**February 2002**

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## What Matters to Canadian NGOs on Aging

### **Reflections on the Five Dialogues Conducted Between October 2001 and February 2002 Prepared by Jacquie Dale, One World Inc.**

Five dialogues were held using the dialogue guide, “What Matters to Canadian NGOs on Aging.” Three of these were pre-tests conducted in October, two in English and one in French. The English sessions were held in Ottawa. One was with Ottawa-based groups and included cross-generational groups. The other was with the National Advisory Council on Aging that brought participants together from across the country. The French session was held in Montreal with NGOs from that area. Two additional sessions were held in February. These were both done in English. One was conducted in Ottawa and one in Toronto. Participants in this last Ottawa session included people from Montreal and Sherbrooke.

In general, the sessions went very well and provided good data for analysis. The moderator and recorder feedback forms also provided good information on materials and process. This report offers some reflections on the dialogues from a process-perspective. Some of these were also included in the original report done following the three pre-tests done in October.

#### **Reflections:**

The participant materials offer a solid foundation for a good dialogue that encourages participants to explore the various themes in-depth. The process works well to facilitate a quality dialogue. However, there are some learnings from this stakeholder-focused process that are worthy of review for future processes:

1. **Give notice that dialogue is different from consultation** - In each session, the participants were from NGOs - many of whom are well-acquainted with government consultation processes. This leads to some “patterns” of interaction that need to be overcome in the dialogue process. For example, NGOs often come prepared with their positions, ready to promote and defend them. When this happens, it slows the dialogue down because the moderator needs to spend more time helping people “unlearn” these patterns, so they can more effectively engage in the dialogue. The more up-front notice that can be given participants that this is not a regular consultation process the better. Even in initial letters of invitation, it would be useful to include a description of the dialogue process.
2. **Reduce skepticism** - The NGO participants also tend to be quite wary that the process is intended to manipulate or co-opt them. This probably stems from past experiences. To counter-act this skepticism, it is important to include information in the materials about what a dialogue is and why it’s done, including the ground rules and the dialogue-debate chart. Clarifying how the themes were chosen and developed is also crucial.
3. **Provide information on other consultation channels** – Participants wanted to know whether other opportunities existed that would allow them to provide direct feedback on the draft strategy. This is particularly important for those who are active in the UN

processes. In a more general sense, this concern relates to number 1 above – NGOs look for a way to engage in the traditional consultation patterns. Some want a space to present their position on the policy issue at hand. In future processes, it might be useful to offer traditional channels as well as the dialogues. This could be as easy as allowing NGOs to send in papers. Alternatively, the sessions could be done as full-day sessions with the afternoon used to build concrete recommendations, based on the common ground found through the morning dialogue.

4. **Dialogue can release new ideas and thinking** – Many participants welcomed the dialogue process and a number expressed great pleasure at the new types of conversation facilitated by the dialogue process. In particular, in one case, the February Ottawa session, the content and depth of the dialogue was outstanding. Participants expressed great satisfaction with the session. What made it so great? In part, at least, it was the ability of the participants to step way outside their usual stakeholder frames of reference and really engage at the level of values. The ability to do this was greatly aided by one participant who continued to express himself at the level of values, setting a model for others to follow. This experience highlights the importance of being clear about what dialogue is attempting to do and then helping to model and reinforce it as participants engage successfully at that level of discourse.
5. **Participation** – While all the sessions were good dialogues, a number of participants did express concern about the small numbers present at some sessions. For example, at the February session in Toronto, there were six people. These small numbers tend to offer a limited diversity of perspectives. Getting people out to sessions is a perennial problem. It is worth exploring further why this is, especially given these were stakeholder dialogues, where one might have assumed the level of interest in participating would be higher. Perhaps the “net” was cast too narrowly. One approach might be to ask people to “identify a friend” – some one else involved in the issue who might otherwise not be invited directly. A number of people also expressed an interest in having younger people participate too - to have a cross-generational dialogue.

**Conclusion:**

Each session had its own character, depending on the mix of people in the room. All were successful in engaging people around the themes in a way that allowed new reflections. Engaging in good dialogue is an approach/skill that can be learned and this experience shows that stakeholders are able and willing to engage usefully in this type of process.