

Potential of the Voluntary Sector to Support Citizen Engagement

Presentation by Judith Maxwell
to the
PPF Canadian Leader's Forum

Banff, Alberta
June 2, 1998

Building knowledge of civil society

CPRN contributions to research

- ▶ Exploring Canadian Values
- ▶ Social Dimensions of Economic Growth
- ▶ The Emerging Sector
- ▶ Connection
- ▶ Charities Doing Commercial Ventures
- ▶ Citizen Engagement in the Social Union
- ▶ Employment in the Nonprofit Sector
- ▶ Mapping Social Cohesion

Building knowledge of civil society

CPRN contribution to practice

- *The Society We Want*: an exercise in public dialogue, funded mainly by foundations
 - ▶ Phase 1: 1996-97 – a dialogue kit for use by 12 voluntary sector partners, with minimal outreach
 - ▶ Phase 2: 1998-00 – a new dialogue kit for use by 13 voluntary sector partners, with active outreach and capacity building
 - ▶ Phase 3: 2000- – spin off a utility for organizing public dialogue to serve the political process; CPRN to continue to do analysis and design issue guides

The Society We Want (TSWW)

Phase 1 accomplishments

- 200+ discussion groups sent feedback forms
- 8 communities held community-wide dialogue
- Molson Breweries supported an Internet pilot
- A workshop with discussion leaders from across Canada distilled best practices and critiqued the dialogue kit
- An in-house assessment provided foundation for Phase 2 applications for funding

TSWW – Lessons learned

- National voluntary organizations have limited leverage over local units – need local champion
- All voluntary organizations over-stretched – need extra resources/logistical support
- Most effective groups include diverse participants
- Need more investment in communication back to groups, after they have met
- Groups build connections in the community

Why are we doing this?

CPRN focused on values clarification, not policy input

- Decline of deference for authority of any type
- Loss of legitimacy of the political process
 - ▶ Though institutions are still credible
- Need to restate/revisit core social values at a time of social and economic transformation (CHST)
- Citizens are thirsting for ways to participate in the policy debate – not to make decisions but to have a voice

Consultation experience a liability

Governments *and* voluntary sector not happy

- Governments worry that:
 - ▶ Process will not be fair, too emotional
 - ▶ Hard to get people up to speed
 - ▶ Voluntary groups can't manage the process
- Voluntary groups worry that:
 - ▶ Not enough facts and background
 - ▶ No chance to be partners through the continuum – upfront to define issues and later in policy work
 - ▶ Not enough time and no feedback

Consultations versus engagement

- Venting versus learning
- Me-first vs common ground
- Government knows best vs citizens add value
- Technical answers vs moral choices
- Controlled process vs open dialogue
- Interest groups only vs groups *and* citizens

New techniques are emerging

None have been tested on a national scale

- Deliberative processes such as
 - ▶ Public dialogue
 - ▶ Citizen juries
 - ▶ Deliberative polling
 - ▶ Study circles
- Involve two-way dialogue, take time
- Require listening, *learning*, working through, gaining respect for the other views
- Build trust, permit views to change

Citizen requirements

Ekos analysis of citizen engagement

- Representative
- Listened to
- Transparent and fair reporting
- Informed/reflective
- Active (two-way)
- Well organized
- Avoid by-passing elected officials

Intermediaries are needed

To complement focus groups/polling etc

- To organize dialogue groups across Canada on contract to governments/ legislative committees
 - ▶ Preparing the objective information
 - ▶ Providing facilitation and synthesis
 - ▶ Reporting back to governments and to citizens
- Using infrastructure/credibility of voluntary groups to engage citizens and groups
- On policy issues: values and priorities; to monitor progress; not for technical details

Voluntary sector has high trust

An effective medium for reaching out to Canadians

- Here are some of the champions we have met:
 - ▶ Augustine, leader of Tamil people in Canada
 - ▶ Julian, a Chinese student in Richmond, BC
 - ▶ Morris, an Irishman by birth, leads United Way in Guelph
 - ▶ Joyce, a community foundation leader in Red Deer
 - ▶ Sheila, a businesswoman in the Laurentians
- All show a passion for nation-building, as well as community-building – a powerful resource

Harnessing the power of civil society

- Trust and reciprocity are essential for a healthy democracy, healthy economy, healthy citizens
- Failing to grasp the opportunity to engage is a recipe for apathy, cynicism, exclusion
- It will take political will to move this forward:
 - ▶ Leadership by governments and by voluntary groups
- Buttressed by strategic investments in the sector and in the capacity for engagement