
"Potential of the Voluntary Sector to Support Citizen Engagement"

Presentation to the Public Policy Forum's Canadian Leaders' Forum

Canadian Policy Research Networks is contributing to research on citizen engagement with the following studies: *Exploring Canadian Values, Social Dimensions to Economic Growth, The Emerging Sector, Connection, Charities Doing Commercial Ventures, Citizen Engagement in the Social Union, Employment in the Non Profit Sector, Mapping Social Cohesion.*

Canadian Policy Research Networks' contribution to practice is through The Society We Want, an exercise in public dialogue. Lessons learned show that:

- national voluntary organizations need a local champion because they have limited leverage over local units,
- the most effective dialogue groups include diverse participants,
- there needs to be more investment in communication back to the groups, after they have met.

Why citizen engagement? There is a loss of legitimacy of the traditional political process. Citizens are thirsting for ways to participate in the policy debate - not to make decisions but to have a voice. Consultation experience to date is often a liability with governments and the voluntary sector equally unhappy. Governments worry that the process will not be fair and too emotional. Voluntary groups worry that there is not a real chance to be partners through the continuum. One solution is to define the issues together - upfront.

Traditional consultations lead to venting instead of learning, technical answers instead of moral choices, interest groups taking precedence over citizens. New techniques are emerging but have not been tested on a national scale. They are deliberative processes such as public dialogue, citizen juries, deliberative polling and study circles. They involve two-way dialogue, and therefore take time. They require listening, learning, working through, gaining respect for the other views. Because they build trust, they permit views to change.

Intermediaries are needed to organize the deliberative processes which are a complement to focus groups, polling and other information - gathering techniques. Dialogue groups can be organized across Canada on contract to governments and legislative committees, using the infrastructure and

credibility of the voluntary sector to engage citizens. These dialogues would pertain to policy issues, not technical details. They can focus on values and priorities and help to monitor progress.

Deliberative processes are learning processes which help to build trust. Trust and reciprocity are essential for a healthy democracy, a healthy economy, and 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. It will take leadership by governments and by voluntary groups, buttressed by strategic investments in the sector and in the capacity for engagement.

(Banff, Alberta, June 2, 1998)