
PUBLIC POLICY AND THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

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JENNIFER LEADS THE ASSOCIATION OF FOOD BANKS IN A MID-SIZED CANADIAN city. At their regular meetings, the directors report changes in the patterns of people using the food banks – more families with young children, more frequent visits, and higher levels of anxiety. A major employer has recently closed, and there are more people out of work: many of the new jobs are part-time and low wage. The food bank directors come to the conclusion that if the situation of their clients is going to improve, it will take more than emergency food. They decide to become involved in a campaign to advocate for improvements to the minimum wage, to see changes to the food allowance portion of welfare payments, and to urge their city to do more to attract new employers to town. In other words, they decide that the next step in providing services to their users is to address the root causes of hunger through changes to policies that affect their clients.

In northern New Brunswick, a number of families begin to notice a growing incidence of respiratory problems in their children. As they talk in the arenas and coffee shops, they realize that there seems to be a pattern, and they decide to meet to talk about why this might be happening and what might be done about it. They form an organization and invite some experts – doctors, epidemiologists, and environmental analysts – to help them. They seek support from one of the larger health umbrella organizations. They launch a public information campaign through the media and public events to increase awareness. Through their work, they identify possible contributing factors and issue warnings. And they identify those public policies that need to be introduced or changed, from health and safety regulations to address possible sources to the inclusion of treatment and drugs in provincial drug plans.

A group of animal/wildlife conservationists in Western Canada has been working for several years in a national coalition that has finally resulted in Canada's ratifying the international agreement on endangered species. But with ratification comes the long, hard work of implementation – identifying which animals will be on the list and what measures should be taken to protect them, developing a monitoring mechanism, and recommending changes in public policy to ensure continued protection.

Groups and organizations like these decide to engage in public policy as an integral dimension of the work they do on behalf of a cause or a group of people. In this article, we describe the process of public policy development and examine the ways in which nonprofit organizations participate in the different stages of the process. Finally, we look at the capacity of organizations to undertake policy work and in the larger political

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environment that supports (or hinders) that work.

A study done in 2005 for four Canadian foundations surveyed a sample of several thousand nonprofit organizations about their work in public policy (Carter, Echenberg, & Plewes, 2005). This survey asked about the nature of that work, how the organizations went about that work (i.e., alone or in coalitions), which levels of government they addressed, and the reasons they were engaged in public policy. Although the results are five years old, they are still assumed to be valid, particularly since more recent work (such as that conducted for the Voluntary Sector Initiative Evaluation) has resulted in consistent findings. Much of the material in this paper is drawn from that report. (See also “What the Numbers Say” in this issue.)

WHAT DOES PUBLIC POLICY DEVELOPMENT CONSIST OF?

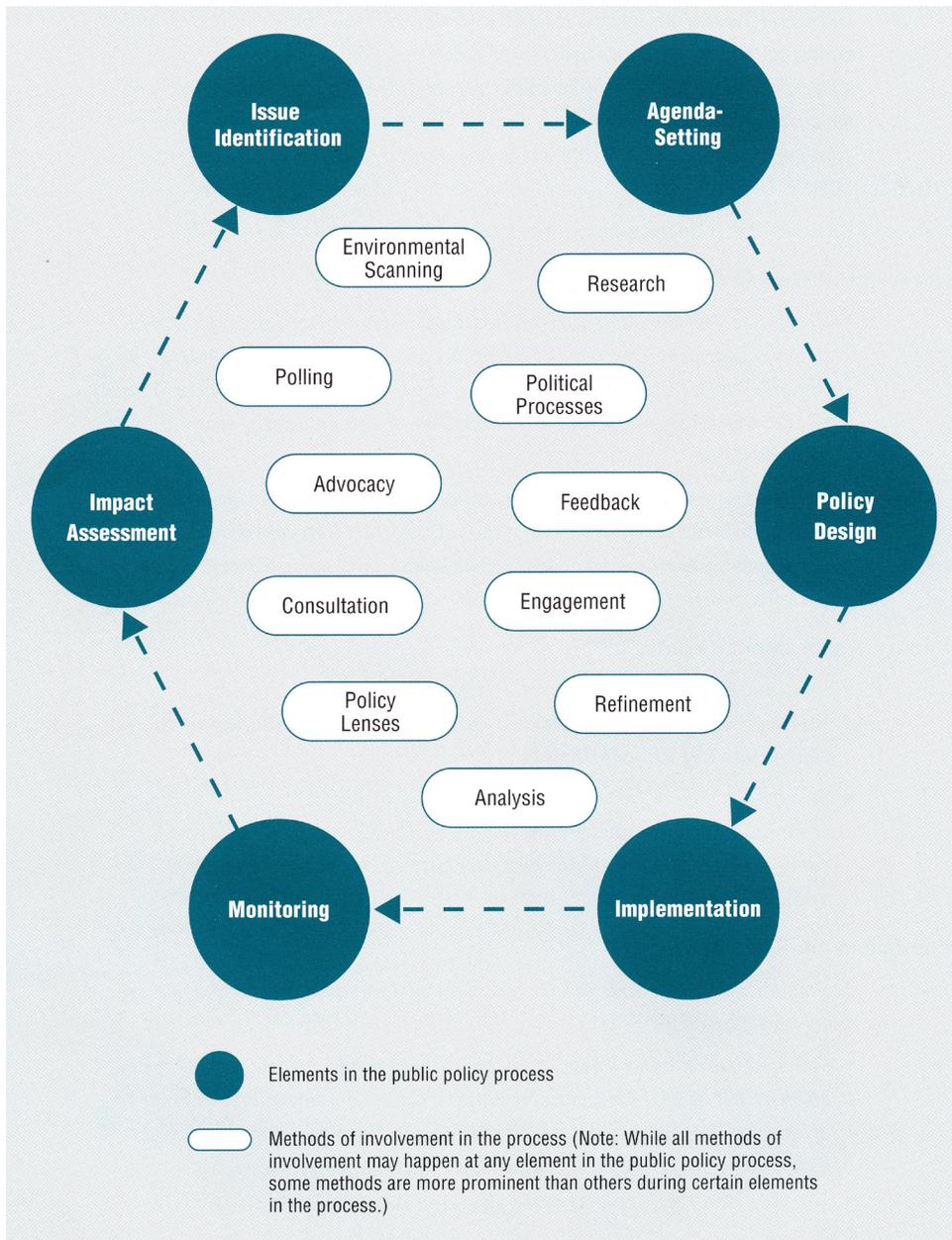
But first, what is public policy exactly and how does it come about?

Public policy refers to decisions taken concerning the selection of goals for society and the means of achieving them. It consists of the approaches agreed upon by governments, as the custodians of the collective resources and rules, to address particular problems or circumstances. Sometimes these are explicit (i.e., they involve a commitment of resources, the introduction of legislation, the setting of limits on harmful materials, etc.). At other times they are implicit (i.e., a refusal to act that ensures a continuation of the status quo that many have been arguing against, or a series of separate decisions that add up to a policy approach even though it is never articulated as such).

Issues to be addressed by public policy are identified in many different ways. Sometimes the issues they touch upon are seen as the core business of governments, and policies on how to deal with these issues are always there in some form but shift over time in response to changing circumstances, the need to reduce costs, the need to respond to pressure/criticism, fresh information, or for some other reason. Other public policy issues are put on the public agenda (“get on the agenda”) after months, years, or even, decades of research, mobilization, and/or public awareness campaigns by nonprofit or labour organizations, business, or major institutions of our societies such as universities, colleges, and healthcare providers. In classic or generic terms, public policy development operates in a number of stages, as illustrated in the following diagram.

Although the diagram is one-dimensional, there are, in fact, complex interactions between the social, economic, and political environments and the creation and implementation of public policies. The philosophy of the party in power has a major impact on affecting which policy issues get on the agenda (i.e., who is listened to), the analysis of these issues, and approaches to solving them.

This diagram also shows a full cycle of policy development, whereas relatively few areas of public policy survive long enough to have their implementation monitored and their impact assessed. Before this happens they are subject to review and revision.



Source: *Joint Accord Table of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2002.*

NONPROFIT SECTOR INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC POLICY – WHO GETS INVOLVED, AND WHY

Different types of organizations get involved in public policy:

- Research-oriented organizations and think tanks get involved because it is in the nature of their work to see their findings applied. Some make the case them-

selves; others share their findings with other organizations that can use this evidence in making the case for change.

- Chapters and branches of federated organizations sometimes get involved in public policy campaigns in their own territory. Often they support public policy work being led by their “head office”; frequently they are invited to help set the policy agenda being taken forward by their “head office.”
- Umbrella organizations engage in public policy on behalf of their members. In fact, the desire to have more effective involvement in public policy through greater numbers is usually one of the underlying rationales for forming or signing up with an umbrella organization. These organizations often represent particular population groups, such as women, youth in care, visible minorities, or particular ethnic groups.
- Coalitions and working groups are formed regularly around particular issues, such as housing, capital punishment, childcare, foreign policy and international development, or prison reform. While some coalitions are short-lived, formed to respond to or initiate a particular policy issue, others are more enduring or quasi-permanent (as are the issues they address).
- Stand-alone organizations typically move into public policy work as an extension of their service-delivery role. They do this to promote longer-term solutions to the problems and needs of their clients and those they serve. Through policy change, they try to address systemic causes underlying the conditions they face in service provision; for example many social service organizations, immigrant-serving organizations, and disability groups.

The 2005 survey of those engaged in public policy asked whether organizations worked alone, or in networks or coalitions. The responses revealed the rather surprising finding that many organizations engaged in public policy work on their own: 89% reported that they work alone; 76% reported they work sometimes in ad hoc coalitions or working groups; and only 58% reported working in formal or enduring coalitions and partnerships (Carter, Echenberg, & Plewes, 2005).

In summary, organizations engage in public policy either as an intrinsic part of their *raison d'être* as a policy- or cause-based organization, or as a logical next step in carrying out the delivery of their services or in response to the condition of their clientele.

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS ENGAGED IN PUBLIC POLICY – HOW WIDESPREAD?

Hard numbers are difficult to come by. Anecdotally and in dialogue within the sector, it appears that only a small percentage – certainly a minority – of organizations engage directly in public policy.

This is confirmed by the Survey of the Voluntary Sector conducted in 2007 as part of the Evaluation of the Voluntary Sector Initiative (Human Resources and Skills Development (2007), which found that 22% of the organizations surveyed said that their organization's mission and operations included contributing to public policy at the federal level (the VSI having been a federal initiative). Presumably another possibly larger percentage would have contributed to provincial or municipal public policy.

The fact that involvement in public policy is carried out by less than 25% of all organizations does not signify a lack of interest by the majority of other organizations. Repeatedly, small and medium organizations providing direct service say that they do not have the capacity (time or expertise) to engage in public policy, but they think it is very important that others do on their behalf; they are ready to contribute to the effort and want to remain connected to policy work in their field.

Banding together with other organizations with the skills and capacity to undertake policy development and dialogue strengthens policy capacity. Umbrella organizations involved in policy work together with smaller organizations in the field in two ways: the organizations on the ground provide the evidence and can inform the policy work about the real effects of current policies. As well, the policy efforts being led by the umbrella organizations can be shared with all those smaller organizations regularly in order that they can align and reinforce their efforts.

NONPROFIT PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC POLICY – WHAT FORM DOES IT TAKE?

Organizations engage in all phases of the public policy process, but their role and involvement are more prominent and formative in some dimensions than others. This issue of *The Philanthropist* contains articles about a few specific policy initiatives. These articles illustrate how some policy work is focused now on defining an issue and raising awareness while other policy processes are at the point of getting policies adopted and implemented.

Referring back to the diagram above, nonprofit organizations are engaged at all stages of the process. They are most prominent in identifying issues in need of attention. Child poverty, poverty among the elderly, breast cancer, AIDS, famines and illiteracy, prisoner abuse, fragmentation within public and private pension systems, and the potential extinction of certain species of animals and birds – all emerged originally from organizations working at the community level and beyond. Those committed to addressing these issues join with others to define what the issue is and reach out to others affected or concerned. Collectively, they work to raise the level of awareness about this issue and its importance and a sense that something needs to be done. Often this can take years. Work on a specific policy initiative may be eclipsed by the work of others who have greater success with another campaign or may gradually falter and fade in the hurly-burly of competing issues.

But many issues do manage to break through the public and government consciousness and ‘get on the agenda.’ It is at this point that the creation of coalitions and groups ready to stand together and do the hard work of policy design (i.e., figuring out what should be done to address these problems), is critical.

Governments claim that designing public policies is the preserve of public authorities since it is public resources that will be expended and public servants who will be held accountable for results. However, in reality, the process of policy design relies heavily on civil society organizations. It is these organizations, working on the ground that have

direct experience about what will work and what will not. In some cases, organizations have undertaken the necessary research, modelling, polling, and consultation, and they come forward with a proposal that is “policy ready” and has all the key stakeholders in agreement. But this is more rare than the scenario in which many different groups bring forward their concerns about an issue and the policy design process features major consultations and deliberations about competing policy designs.

The implementation of a public policy usually involves nonprofit organizations to some degree, regardless of whether or not they have been involved in the design or in getting the issue on the agenda. In this phase, policy frameworks are developed into programs, and the relationship with government becomes one of program delivery. Organizations with particular strengths in delivery are not necessarily those with the deepest familiarity with the issues or the populations groups involved, which further complicates monitoring the roll out and assessing the impact. Those organizations involved in the first instance in making the case for action in their field of activity are often the ones consulted in assessing results and what should be done next.

The 2005 survey (Carter, Echenberg, & Plewes, 2005) asked respondents which of several types of public policy engagement they undertake:

- The majority (89%) reported that they engaged in identifying issues, raising awareness and getting issues on the public policy agenda.
- Two thirds (66%) reported that they engaged in mobilizing and promoting particular actions or policy approaches, which is also called advocacy, lobbying, or campaigning.
- More than half (58%) reported that they engaged in developing policy solutions through research and analysis (“policy-ready research”); this is often the most difficult task and requires considerable expertise.

While the understanding of these terms may vary somewhat across organizations, the above breakdown is likely an accurate reflection of how organizations come into public policy engagement, beginning with building awareness and understanding of their issue(s), then lobbying or campaigning for particular approaches, and, finally, with greater knowledge and experience, moving into the development and design of particular policy solutions.

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN PUBLIC POLICY – HOW SUCCESSFUL ARE THEY?

Success is extremely difficult to assess, particularly in public policy campaigns designed to increase public awareness. Some high-profile campaigns are well-known when the result is a high-level program or international protocol such as the Treaty to End Land-Mines or the introduction of the National Child Tax Benefit. But is this the only definition of success? Success may result in policy change at the most senior level, but even that can be mitigated if the policy fails to hold, proves unsustainable, or crumbles under the first criticism. Success can also be seen in terms of increased awareness and attention to a particular problem or condition or in its ability to persuade the previously unconvinced of the seriousness of an issue. Finally, public policy success is sometimes defined

as doing the best possible job on behalf of an organization's clients.

Setting objectives and defining success is most often an iterative process. Campaigns are often launched with the objective of understanding the issue better and giving it clarity, or bringing attention and shining a spotlight on the issue. Success at that level brings greater clarity and wider buy-in, which permit the development of new objectives, which often take the form of “getting on the agenda” of decision-makers. Success at getting on the agenda then allows objectives and targets to be set for concrete actions to correct or change public policy. The achievements at each of these stages constitute success. It is exceedingly rare that a public policy process starts out with a specific design for policy change.

POLICY CAPACITY IN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Effective public policy involvement has two principal dimensions:

- the capacity or skills and knowledge of organizations to undertake public policy dialogue, and
- the context in which policy is brought forward, i.e., the degree to which there is a positive value put on the input of civil society and an openness to – even if there is no agreement on – the information and proposals coming forward.

The *capacity* of organizations to do policy work of whatever kind and to do it effectively consists of a number of factors. These are:

- resources (staff and money) to dedicate to this work (the shortage of which is reported to be the largest impediment);
- skills in policy analysis and development;
- knowledge about the issue in question and about evidentiary and ‘scientific’ research findings;
- understanding of the policy development processes within governments, including opportunities and methods for input, etc.;
- skills in building coalitions to work collectively on an issue;
- skills in communications and advocacy, including the creation and operation of campaigns and awareness-building;
- access to decision makers; and
- a “safe” environment where advocating policy positions or being critical of current government positions will not result in punitive measures (e.g., reductions in funding, etc.).

We know that most organizations involved in public policy indicate they do not have the wherewithal to do so effectively. The National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organization (NSNVO) found that many organizations reported difficulties participating in public policy, ranging from 36% of those organizations in sports and recreation to 62% of those in the health field (Statistics Canada, 2004). The Survey of Voluntary Sector for the VSI Evaluation went further: one in four organizations said they lacked time/staff to engage in policy development, followed closely by lack of funding or resources to commit to public policy (18%) and, to a lesser extent, lack of expertise within the organization

to contribute effectively (13%). About one in four organizations (20%) identified lack of access to the policy process as a barrier, due either to limited access to senior decision-makers within government or lack of opportunities to provide input (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2007).

So what are some ways to make policy capacity and engagement more widespread and effective?

One key component is *teaching and training*. This issue of *The Philanthropist* contains a proposal for the establishment of an advocacy school. There are already a number of training courses offered in a few places designed to build policy capacity.

In that regard, several institutions and foundations offering training in policy capacity met recently in Toronto to exchange their experiences. All offer courses for nonprofits, usually consisting of teaching how policy development works in government (at all levels) and approaches and experiences in mobilizing and campaigning. Everyone at the meeting recognized that public policy includes a wide range of activity, so training needs to be varied. Training could be either wide and broad (providing “civics” training to many about the roles of different authorities and the overall landscape of supports and resources for such work) or narrow and deep (training to a smaller number in an intense form that could involve actual creation of a policy initiative). All agreed that classroom or theoretical training could only do part of what is needed and that individual coaching and accompanying always need to be a central component.

The second component consists of a *positive environment for public/citizen engagement* in policy dialogue. The capacity and effectiveness of organizations in public policy depends upon to some degree on the receptivity that exists to listen and to hear what the voices of civil society are saying. Receptivity can be of the passive variety, requiring that key stakeholders be consulted on upcoming initiatives or changes – the “how do you like it” variety. Or it can be of the more active variety in which where views developed within civil society by engaged citizens are brought forward to become the basis for future public policies.

Governments develop different approaches to dealing with the involvement of civil society in public policy. Some governments welcome it – and even build it into their overall approach (‘participatory democracy’). Other governments welcome it as a way to demonstrate responsiveness, but only within already-established the frameworks already established. Yet other governments attempt to banish it, limiting which voices will be listened to, and even taking punitive measures such as reductions or cuts to long-standing funding arrangements against those who speak out on public policies. Such punitive measures are sometimes accompanied by increases in funding for the direct services provided by these same organizations, sending a clear message that while service provision is acceptable and worthy, speaking up for populations served, recommending longer-term systemic approaches to issues, or being critical of the current approaches are not.

Returning to our advocates at the beginning, it is hoped that the association of food banks in their anti-poverty campaign, the organization working for acknowledgement of the wide-spread condition in their children, and those working to ensure inclusion

of endangered species will all find themselves working in an environment where their voices and proposals are heard and valued.

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