Backgrounder
The Need for a Unified Voice on Policy
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As part of the Taking Stock project, the National Alliance for Children and Youth (NACY) has been speaking with organizations, key sector leaders and front-line workers about some of the challenges facing nonprofit organizations (NPOs) serving children and youth. A key finding was that child and youth sector organizations recognize that there is a need to participate on policy and systems issues that have broader implications for the sector as a whole, but they struggle with allocating resources to participate in initiatives that are not based on front-line issues. Project stakeholders identified the need for a national policy framework for children and youth as a key tool to support them in their work with children and youth and their families. This backgrounder provides an overview of this issue and outlines key strategies to overcome challenges in developing policy responses.

Introduction

The nonprofit child and youth serving sector needs a national policy framework as the key tool to achieving a unified "voice" on policy. While there are many policy frameworks in Canada focusing on specific populations, issues and regions, there is no national child and youth framework that covers the entire sector. A holistic, outcomes-based framework would benefit the sector and support NPOs in their work. However, there are challenges to its development and to NPOs' participation in policy activities. This backgrounder highlights the importance of a unified "voice" on policy in the form of a national framework, outlines the challenges to participation in policy and framework development and provides strategies to address these challenges.

Definitions of Policy Frameworks

Policy frameworks are comprehensive documents that articulate a shared vision and principles, and guide policy and program development and investment[1]. They are often developed by government, with input collected from stakeholders. However, policy frameworks can also be used by sectors outside government to provide a focal point to their work, outline priorities and determine long-term objectives. For a sector that wants to create a unified "voice" on policy, a framework would be a key tool to achieving this.

Policy frameworks create a common agenda for a sector. This strengthens the ability of a sector to communicate its priorities to government and other funders. Through a framework's shared vision, a sector can collaborate to influence government policy and program development and investments. With established priorities, policy frameworks also provide the collective strategy for a sector to overcome key issues.

Policy frameworks are useful tools to increase the strength of a sector and improve services. By taking a system-level approach, frameworks can facilitate coordination,

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[1] Jeffrey, Kamara. United Way Toronto. *Youth Policy: What Works and What Doesn't.* Toronto, Ontario: United Way Toronto, 2008.

alignment of programs and identification of gaps[2]. When evidence-based measurable outcomes are incorporated into a framework, it can focus the sector on long-term goals and limit the diversion of resources to short-term issues[3]. By building on a sector's individual efforts, policy frameworks can create synergies within service delivery.

Many governments have created targeted child and youth related frameworks. However, there is no comprehensive national policy framework that the sector can use as a unified "voice" on policy. Ideally, a framework would be developed in partnership with government. In the absence of this, the sector could still develop a policy framework to provide strategic direction, act as a mechanism for coordination and collaboration, help reach consensus on priorities, and establish long-term outcomes.

Challenges for the Nonprofit Sector

There are a number of challenges that impede the ability of NPOs serving children and youth to establish a unified "voice" on policy and develop a framework to guide the work of the sector. Many NPOs lack the time, resources and expertise to participate in policy activities, let alone in the development of a national policy framework, which would require a significant amount of effort, coordination and collaboration. NPOs will also need to overcome the challenge of reconciling the diverse – and sometimes conflicting – priorities, approaches and contexts within the sector. Furthermore, the current funding environment makes collaboration within the sector difficult.

Lack of Time. In most NPOs, staff time is mainly dedicated to service delivery and funding-related administration. With the latter growing more demanding, less time is left for staff to focus on policy activities, which are time consuming and not directly linked to services. Management who are increasingly focused on the short-term sustainability of the organization have little time for the type of strategic planning and identification of priorities necessary for the development of a policy framework[4]. Many NPOs feel that they are providing their clients with "band-aid" solutions to their problems, but don't have the organizational commitment or knowledge in place to develop the capacity of their clients to deal with barriers in an empowering manner

Lack of Resources. The benefits of policy work are often difficult to measure and the payoffs are not always immediate. In the current climate, it is therefore difficult to justify devoting a large portion of scarce resources to policy activities that shift attention away from service delivery, especially when there is no funding to specifically support those activities[5]. While a collaborative initiative like the development of a policy framework for the sector would help overcome resource challenges by pooling efforts, it would require a considerable amount of staff time to ensure each organization has a

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[2] Ibid.

[3] United Way of Greater Toronto. *Toronto's Youth Serving System: Fragmented Paths to Youth Development.* Toronto, Ontario: United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008.

[4] HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector. *Driving Change: A National Study of Canadian Nonprofit Executive Leaders.* Ottawa, Ontario: HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector 2012.

[5] Torjman, Sherri. Community Roles in Policy. Ottawa, Ontario. The Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2009.

strong voice in the partnership. With many organizations concerned about their survival, it is hard to shift focus to the long-term needs of the sector and the population it serves.

Lack of Expertise. Many NPOs do not have the organizational expertise to conduct policy research, analysis and development. Policy activities require a specific skill set and knowledge of the policy process[6]. Due to a lack of time and resources, it is difficult for NPOs to invest in staff training and capacity building to develop these skills[7]. The changing government policy process and political environment also make it difficult for NPOs to remain current on their acquired policy knowledge.[8]

Diverse Priorities. The nonprofit child and youth serving sector is made up of NPOs with distinct – though often complimentary – mandates and objectives. These NPOs have varying scopes of work, target many populations and deal with a wide breadth of issues. Each makes a significant contribution in Canada through its own unique goals. While a comprehensive policy framework should address the scope of work, target populations and issues addressed by the entire sector, certain objectives will need to be prioritized over others. Given the importance of the work undertaken by the sector, it might be difficult to prioritize objectives and decide how they all fit in to the overall framework.

Diverse Approaches. NPOs apply different theoretical approaches to working with children and youth that inform their objectives, interventions and expected outcomes. The anticipated impact of a policy or program depends partly on which approaches a NPO and its practitioners follow, and will determine its policy recommendations[9]. It would be difficult to develop a policy framework that encapsulates all of these diverse approaches. To develop a coherent framework, NPOs would have to achieve consensus on which approaches should inform the policy framework.

Diverse Contexts. NPOs operate in diverse contexts across Canada. Some are locally focused while others work at the provincial or national level. Some operate in small rural communities while others in large urban centres. The different social, economic, demographic and political factors create unique population and organizational needs that may be difficult to synthesize a unified "voice". With large disparities in capacity and resources, small organizations may fear they will not be heard, or that there will be a loss of diversity and minority cultural voices in a large forum[10]. Given the vast differences in Canada, it is difficult to develop a national framework that adequately captures the regional diversity across the country.

Environment of Competition. The sector operates in an environment of increasingly limited funding distributed through highly competitive processes. This creates and

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[6] Mulholland, Elizabeth. *New Ways to Keep Up Our End of the Policy Conversation.* The Philanthropist 23(2), 2010.

[7] Carter, Susan. "Public Policy and the Non-Profit Sector." *The Philanthropist.* Volume 23, Issue 4. 2011.

[8] Watson, Marshall. *Social Policy Frameworks in Canada: Examples and Opportunities.* Victoria, BC: The Federation of Community Social Services of BC, 2011.

[9] United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008.

[10] Imagine Canada. *Strengthening the Capacity of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations to Serve Canadian: Recommendations Based on the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations.* Imagine Canada, 2006.

enables competition rather than collaboration between NPOs. As a result, the current environment is not one that fosters information sharing, resources pooling and partnership creation. Instead, NPOs must often consider their own viability over the best interests of the sector[11]. This environment impedes the sector's ability to develop a unified "voice" on policy, which would require close collaboration among NPOs.

Addressing the Challenges

The current environment, marked by limited resources and high-needs, creates a strong impetus for the nonprofit child and youth serving sector to develop a national policy framework. A policy framework can help strengthen the sector's voice, and ability to raise awareness of priorities and tackle key issues. There are several mechanisms to overcome the challenges to developing a framework.

Establish a Shared Vision. The first step to developing a policy framework is the establishment of a shared vision based on common values and principles[12]. A shared vision provides a solid foundation to focus efforts and continue to build consensus. It can help avoid disagreement when setting priorities and desired outcomes.

Focus on Outcomes. To overcome the challenges associated with creating a unified "voice" on policy, the sector can reach consensus on key desired outcomes for children and youth. Using research and accepted measures, NPOs can establish broad developmental, social, and economic outcomes to guide the policy framework[13]. This process can help ensure that all organizations are in agreement on overall goals and objectives related to the sector. The use of evidence-based outcomes will also help build a durable consensus that is backed by research.

Identify Leaders and Champions. Sector leaders and key champions can be used to help galvanize support and build consensus among NPOs[14]. They can act as visionaries, intermediaries and advocates for the sector. Identifying leaders and champions that represent a broad cross-section of NPOs can also help ensure all organizations – whether big or small – will be well represented.

Seek Government Support. Policy frameworks are useful tools to help governments guide program development and direct financial resources. While the involvement of government is not essential, its financial support could allow NPOs with limited resources to participate in the development of a policy framework. Working with government can help create a holistic framework, prevent the formation of silos and help align priorities. Research has found that comprehensive policy frameworks that included government, stakeholders and the community also had the maximum impact and positive outcomes. A plan that is tangible, realistic and "ready-to-implement" can help gain government support for a sector-led policy framework[15]. Furthermore, with clear outcomes established, funding requests to support policy activities are stronger.

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[11] United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008.
[12] Jeffrey, Kamara, 2008.
[13] Ibid.
[14] United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008.
[15] Watson, Marshall, 2011.

Further reading:

Canadian Policy Research Network. *The Future of Policy Capacity in Canada: Roundtable Report.* 2009.

This report provides an overview of the changing policy landscape in Canada, with a focus on the public sector.
http://www.cprn.org/documents/51380_EN.pdf

Carter, Susan. "Public Policy and the Non-Profit Sector." *The Philanthropist.* Volume 23, Issue 4. 2011.

This article discusses the role of nonprofit organizations in public policy in Canada. It outlines the factors necessary for organizations to participate in policy activities, and mechanisms for organizations to improve their policy capacity.
http://thephilanthropist.ca/index.php/phil/article/view/883/747

Imagine Canada. *A Framework for Action for the Nonprofit Sector.* Imagine Canada, 2010.

This paper outlines key challenges faced by the nonprofit sector and strategies to overcome them.
http://www.imaginecanada.ca/files/www/en/publicpolicy/framework_for_action.pdf

Imagine Canada. *Strengthening the Capacity of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations to Serve Canadian: Recommendations Based on the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations.* Imagine Canada, 2006.

This report outlines key issues and provides recommendations for government, business and the nonprofit sector to strengthen the capacity of nonprofit organizations. It includes issues and recommendations around the participation of nonprofit organizations in policy activities.
http://www.imaginecanada.ca/files/www/en/nsnvo/a_strengthening_capacity_of_organizations.pdf

Jeffrey, Kamara. United Way Toronto. *Youth Policy: What Works and What Doesn't.* Toronto, Ontario: United Way Toronto, 2008.

This report examines the various youth policy models in Canada and identifies key elements to successful frameworks.
http://www.unitedwaytoronto.com/downloads/whatWeDo/reports/YouthPolicy-WhatWorks-fullreport.pdf

Joint Accord Table of the Voluntary Sector Initiative. *Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue*. Ottawa, ON: Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2002.

This report outlines a code of conduct developed for policy activities between the nonprofit and government sector. It provides a good overview of the policy process and highlights key principles when engaging in policy activities.
http://www.vsi-isbc.org/eng/policy/pdf/codes_policy.pdf

Moore, Sean. *Can Public Policy Advocacy Be Taught? Or Learned?* The Philanthropist. 32(4), 2011.

This article discusses policy advocacy by nonprofit organizations. It outlines some of the key mistakes nonprofit organizations makes when engaging in policy activities.
http://www.thephilanthropist.ca/index.php/phil/article/view/880

Mulholland, Elizabeth. *New Ways to Keep Up Our End of the Policy Conversation.* The Philanthropist 23(2), 2010.

This article discusses the loss of policy capacity within the nonprofit sector and outlines strategies for improving policy capacity.
http://thephilanthropist.ca/index.php/phil/article/view/834

Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada. *Connecting and Collaborating to Develop Policy Capacity.* 2005.

This report provides a guide for nonprofit organizations to get involved in policy. While the report focuses on the health sector, its recommendations are applicable to all nonprofits organizations and can act as a useful tool for organizations trying to build their policy capacity.
http://www.cfsh.ca/files/PDF/Connecting_and_Collaborating_Tool_FINAL._2005.pdf

United Way of Greater Toronto. *Toronto's Youth Serving System: Fragmented Paths to Youth Development.* Toronto, Ontario: United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008.

This report provides an analysis of the youth serving sector in the Greater Toronto Area and highlights challenges faced by the sector. It includes a discussion of policy and youth frameworks.

http://ceris.metropolis.net/Virtual%20Library/other/UnitedWay2008YouthPrograms.pdf

Watson, Marshall. *Social Policy Frameworks in Canada: Examples and Opportunities.*
Victoria, BC: The Federation of Community Social Services of BC, 2011.

This report examines various social policy frameworks in Canada. It identifies
challenges, lessons learned and best practices in the development and implementation
of the policy frameworks. It also highlights the different roles nonprofit organizations
can take in policy development.
http://www.fcssbc.ca/sf-docs/corebc/strategicplanningpolicypaper.pdf