

Association for Nonprofit and Social Economy Research (ANSER)
conference scheduled for June 2-4, 2010, Montreal

Policy advocacy experiences of nonprofit social service organizations: caught between rocks and hard places?

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(draft May 2010 – please do not cite without permission from author)

ANSER CONFERENCE THEME AREA: *public policy and government relations*

ABSTRACT

Social service nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in Canada play an important role in advocating for healthy public policy. This paper explores the dynamic interface between NPOs, governments and the marginalized communities they serve during advocacy processes. NPOs often find themselves in precarious places regarding their policy advocacy role as they interface with governments, other NPOs and marginalized communities. This paper describes these precarious places based on qualitative data collected from 39 NPOs around the province of Saskatchewan. These data show how innovative advocacy work unfolds and enriches our understanding of the varied field of policy advocacy.

Key words – policy advocacy, civic participation, nonprofit social services,

Brief Biography

After 20 years of doing community-based research and policy advocacy with marginalized communities through the nonprofit human service sector, Gloria returned to university to complete her PhD. She is now employed as a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit (SPHERU), University of Regina, where her research focuses on social justice, public policy advocacy, civic engagement and healthy communities. She also teaches part-time in the Justice Studies Department at the University of Regina.

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Acknowledgements – The author is grateful for the initial support provided by the Community and Population Health Research Training Program for doctoral students, sponsored by Canadian Institutes for Health Research, University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan. Currently this research is supported by the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation (SHRF) Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship program.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE

Empirical data on the social policy advocacy work of the nonprofit social service sector in Canada have slowly been emerging over the past decade. Social service nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have always played and continue today to play an important role in advocating for healthy public policy (Hall & Banting, 2000; Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2001). However, NPOs often find themselves in precarious places regarding their policy advocacy role. This paper delves inside advocacy processes and describes these precarious places based on qualitative data collected from 39 NPOs around the province of Saskatchewan. Depending on the social policy issue, NPOs find themselves caught between rocks and hard places when it comes to their interface with governments, other NPOs, and the marginalized communities they serve. Based on the front line service delivery work they do, they see the need to alter social policies for the betterment of their clients. However, when they set out to inspire changes in policies, they may be met by hostile governments, marginalized people who demand a seat at the table and/or other NPOs who believe advocacy is too risky for their organization. The research question explored in this study is, what do the interfaces between NPOs, governments and marginalized communities look like and how do NPOs negotiate these as they roll out their advocacy work?

For this current study, social policy advocacy consists of those intentional efforts of NPOs to change existing or proposed government policies on behalf of or with groups of marginalized people (Ezell, 2001). Policy advocacy is a process that is initiated outside government walls while policy participation occurs from the inside (Boyce, et al., 2001; Phillips & Orsini, 2002) – basically governments consult while NPOs advocate (Stienstra, 2003).

Social policy advocacy involves myriad relationships among NPOs, governments and marginalized communities. These relationships are dynamic over time. In terms of the NPO-

government interface, “advocacy and funding are two of the most controversial areas of government and voluntary sector relations” (Brock & Banting, 2001, p. 10). With regard to the NPO-NPO interface, competition for the same sources of funding can inhibit the creation of collaborative advocacy efforts (Browne, 1996; DeSantis, 2008; Luther & Prempeh, 2003). The interface between NPOs and the marginalized communities they serve also warrants examination because these shift over time depending on the policy issue, the NPOs’ philosophy regarding participation and NPO organizational constraints.

Social policy advocacy is a form of civic participation (Boris & Mosher-Williams, 1998; Salamon & Lessans Geller, 2008). Civic participation - also known as citizen involvement and engagement (S. Phillips & Orsini, 2002) - refers to individuals who “are actively engaged in social and political action such as lobbying” directed at governments (Hancock, Labonte, & Edwards, 2000, p.53). Panitch (2008) and Abelson et al. (2003) state there is an increasing interest in democratizing public policy processes through engaging an informed citizenry given the apparent non-participatory nature of governments in Canada. Concerns about a “democratic deficit” have surfaced recently in Canada (Canadian Policy Research Networks & Ascentum Inc., 2005). As well, questions about social inclusion and who should participate in social policy making are common (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2003).

“Advocacy chill” is promoted by some governments (Harvie, 2002; Scott, 2003). It refers to the inhibitory effect that government laws and funding regimes have on NPO advocacy behaviour (Phillips, 2001). However, the silencing impact of advocacy chill may be more a result of the institutional nature of the nonprofit sector than government regulations (Elson, 2008).

METHOD

Using a critical inquiry methodology, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured phone interviews in 2006 and 2007. The sample analysed comprised 39 social service NPOs from 18 different communities from around the province of Saskatchewan. Inductive analysis from the data was completed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

RESULTS

In general, the interviewed NPOs engage in advocacy and believe that it is an important NPO function. Taken together, this sample of 39 NPOs offer us an inside look at some of the tensions and opportunities with which these NPOs contend. The tensions are labelled rocks and hard places while the opportunities are labelled soft spots. The rocks and hard places refer to the elements which can be immobilizing for NPOs, can generate NPO anxiety, and require NPOs to do some creative problem solving to overcome. The soft spots refer to the places where NPOs find space to have safe conversations, create innovative policy ideas and push to achieve some degree of desired policy change.

NPOs have diverse and fluid approaches to advocacy. First, all of the NPOs stated their advocacy work is informed by their daily front-line contact with people in need; “as long as we’re involved in direct service delivery ... we’ll always have our finger on the pulse” (NPO-14). Second, advocacy appears to exist as a continuum based on visibility and scale. Some NPOs work alone quietly behind the scenes to encourage change in policies (NPO-7) while others join coalitions, use the media to get their message out and publicly confront governments. Third, policy advocacy does not appear to be a discrete phenomenon, but rather, participants talked about program, funding and research-oriented advocacy while also referring to policy advocacy. When NPOs were explicitly asked about policy advocacy they drew these other types of

advocacy into the interview, suggesting they are interrelated. And fourth, an advocacy typology appears to exist wherein policy advocacy is advanced as a single NPO, a coalition or network of NPOs, sometimes involving marginalized people and sometimes involving governments.

The NPO-government interface is one which NPOs had much to say. Some NPOs find themselves caught between rocks and hard places when it comes to having to deal with governments while advocating for changes in public policy. Seven main categories were coded from the transcripts including: governments tie funding to NPO service delivery; governments cut funding to NPOs which creates organizational instability and advocacy is subsequently dropped from NPOs' workplans; government rules create a feeling of anxiety and are confusing for NPOs; governments can create a threatening atmosphere for NPOs which inhibits NPOs from speaking out; governments may not be receptive to discussion about certain policy issues; and governments invite NPOs to join government advisory committees, but then NPOs find themselves forced to follow the government's agenda. Caught between these rocks and hard places leads NPOs seek out places where movement and change in policy may be possible –these are the soft spots.

The NPO-NPO interface is another area of analysis. Analysis of the interview transcripts showed that some NPOs find themselves caught between rocks and hard places when it comes to the relationships among themselves. There were five main categories of data including: some NPOs feel they are competing with other NPOs for government funding, thus they are less inclined to collaborate with other NPOs on policy advocacy initiatives; some NPOs perceive their role is to deliver services and nothing else; some NPOs feel too vulnerable to do advocacy; NPOs' philosophy may not be participatory and/or they believe they do not have time to engage other NPOs, thus they move forward on their advocacy work alone; and NPOs are physically

disconnected from other NPOs (e.g., remote and/or northern areas of Saskatchewan) and may have technology communication barriers which impacts negatively on collaborative policy advocacy. These precarious places lead NPOs to deliberate over alternatives to advocate for change. These are alternative soft spots where NPOs see possibilities for advocacy success.

Finally, there is the interface between NPOs and the marginalized groups they serve, which is implicated in social policy advocacy. NPOs can find themselves caught between rocks and hard places with this group of people too. For example, some NPOs believe inclusion of marginalized groups in advocacy work is essential while others do not, some NPOs see real risks in the form of reprisals from governments if their clients speak out, some NPOs also see personal barriers to people's involvement in advocacy, other NPOs see many structural barriers to people's participation (e.g., not being invited to meetings, lack of child care and transportation to meetings). Because of these challenges, some NPOs state they do not engage marginalized people because it takes too much time and energy; "I'm not as romantic as I used to be about client participation" (NPO-12). Given these myriad rocks and hard places, NPOs attempt to seek out soft spots where they may engage the people they serve in advocacy efforts. However, there is an awareness of the powerlessness of marginalized groups and the risks they face, thus many NPOs take direction from their clients.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study shows that a diversity of NPOs find themselves caught between rocks and hard places, however, many seek out 'soft spots' from where they can push for policy change. This sample comprises NPOs active in advocacy thus the discovery of soft spots is not surprising. However, there are other NPOs who do not ever embark on advocacy because they cannot move past the rocks and hard places. In light of the diversity of groups, the rocks and hard

places, as well as soft spots with which NPOs must interact when they do advocacy, it is not surprising that advocacy is characterized by multiplicity, fluidity, unpredictability and intentionality.

Much advocacy research to date has centred on organizational resources, environmental incentives, the political environment, staff professionalization, as well as advocacy rules and institutional structures (Elson, 2008; Mosley, in press; Nicholson-Crotty, 2009). This study enriches our understanding of the varied field of policy advocacy through an analysis of the dynamic interfaces between NPOs, the marginalized groups they serve and the governments with whom they interact.

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