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Panel: The dynamic world of nonprofit organizations' advocacy work

Extended Abstract - "Our authority is community-based": Practical policy advocacy in community-based organisations

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Policy advocacy is an important, yet increasingly subterranean aspect of CBOs work. It is important because the voluntary sector is a key site in the formation and practice of citizenship and in the pursuit of social justice, yet subterranean because of a tendency among governments and funders to discourage or outright prohibit this type of activity. Funding and financing instruments, in particular, play a significant role in shaping the advocacy environment in Canada -- any consideration of policy advocacy among CBOs must also consider this relationship.

Scott and Struthers (2006) describe the range of approaches that funders employ with respect to CBOs along a continuum of 'giving', 'investing' and 'shopping' and suggest the dominant approach today is one of 'shopping'. The shopping model limits the advocacy function of CBOs in two key ways. Practically, many CBOs find that this funding model ties funding to specific projects and activities in ways that do not allow time or resources for advocacy work (Scott and Struthers, 2006). However, this model also functions on a metaphoric and conceptual level to limit the advocacy function of CBOs by employing the language and constructs of the market. This re-positions the role of CBOs away from participants in a broader social movement for equity and justice and instead places organisations in competition with one another to win contracts for the provision of goods and services. In this model clients and community members are also re-case as consumers and entrepreneurial individuals responsible alone for their own successes and failures. As Evans & Shields (2002) note, "market, individual, consumers, clients—these are the new hallmarks, the conceptual furniture of the neoliberal project" (p. 146). Foucault (1977) also reminds of the important productive capacity of technical documents such as funding guidelines, terms of reference and agreements, noting they become "no longer a monument for future memory, but a document for future use" (p. 191). My research is also driven by a concern about this 'future use' potential and a concern that, as a sector, we may be engaged in a collective re-writing of our role and history. Considered thusly, funding policy advocacy among CBOs is more than simply a matter of self-interest or self-preservation, rather it is also a form of advocacy around different citizenship ideals and competing visions of society.

Through my research with one CBO I explored the impacts of funding relationship on their work and self-conception. Specifically I was interested in the policy-practice interactions and the opportunities these created for "critique, resistance and intervention" (Keevers, Treleaven and Sykes, 2008, p. 461). In this case, I found the CBO I worked with engaged in a form of practical

policy advocacy that challenged a marketized vision of society and suggests opportunity for a more equitable and just society.

The definition of policy advocacy I'm considering here is decidedly broad and includes day to day interactions and practices that allow this CBO to challenge existing policy. I found the CBOs I worked with engaged in three specific practices that form or support funding policy advocacy: collaboration, community connection and challenging.

Community Led Organisations United Together (CLOUT) is a network of organisations, of which the CBO is worked with is a member, that was formed to challenge some of the funding limitations and strengthen the voice of CBOs by working collectively. This was indentified as important, because as one respondent in this study indicated "we recognize at the community level that a lot of the funding initiatives are done in isolation, that they are done sometimes to divide us because organisations have to compete for the same dollars and that is sometimes done successfully" (2010-01-22A) or as another said of their decision to join CLOUT "we are applying for the same funding, fighting for the same buck so why don't we just collectively decide who is applying for what, so that person can do it well, instead all of us to a little bit of everything and nothing" (2010-01-22A). The respondents all agree that collaborating through their membership in CLOUT has strengthened all of the organisations involved in the coalition, freeing up additional time and strengthening relationships between the organisations. Further, as a collective CLOUT has been able to use their collective voice to bring many inner city issues to the forefront. Real partnership and collaboration are two practices that are changing the way that organisations and funders relate to one another.

This CBO also draws on local discourses of 'community' and engages in practices of community-building as a source of strength that allows them to challenge the limitations of the project funding model and neoliberal discourse. Several commentators have noted that, as responsibility for social service provision was devolved to CBOs, many lost touch with their membership base resulting in 'mission drift' and the development of services more attune to the whims of government than the needs of community (Shragge, 2003; Orsini, 2006). However, respondents in this project reflected that their organisational connection to community is an important touchstone and source of authority for the organisation. This connection has been drawn on as a source of authority in instances of disagreement with funders. One respondent relayed a situation about a nationally funded project in which the CBO had different policies from the funder with regard to an aspect of the program. In this instance, the respondent noted that "we have to remind them that we are an independent, community based organisation and they can't…their policies can overrule our policies because *our authority is community based*" (2010-01-19A). Turning to community in this instance, helped overcome a challenging situation with a funder and provided an opportunity to educate the funder about different models of accountability and authority in CBOs.

Lastly, I found that this CBO saw a role for themselves in educating funders about the limitations of the current funding model and engaged in resistive and transformative practices in their relationship with funders. The CBO employs a story-telling approach in reporting their work because, as one participant stated, "the kind of change that we provides is best communicated with a more anecdotal approach" (2010-01-19, p. 4). This is also a conscious effort to disrupt some of the limitations of current reporting systems. Respondents repeatedly emphasised the importance of narrative reporting in the interviews, for them, this was a better way demonstrated a more fulsome picture of success and a picture of success that acknowledges community members as people and citizens in their own right.

"So whether they want to see it or not, they are going to see that 'so and so' graduated today… I think it is good for them to see, you know, an example of a kid where five years ago they were saying 'nobody can do it' and now see in those reports that this child is now doing well on their own, they got a job, are in school" (2010-01-22, p. 4).

Acknowledging these types successes demonstrates respect for the community members who participate in their programs. It represents a refusal to reduce people to numbers. It also highlights that they sees a role in educating funders. Several respondents articulated this sentiment one noting, "we feel we need to be building their capacity as a reader" (2010-01-22A, p. 4) and another stating, "sometimes we have to teach funders about why we do things the way we do" (2010-01-22, p. 4). Movement on this issue is slow, but there is a sense that their efforts are having an impact and that there is a growing willingness among funders at all levels to have a conversation around these issues.

Keevers et al. (2008) speak to the opportunities these created for "critique, resistance and intervention" created at the point of intersection between policy and practice (p. 461). I argue by looking at these points of intersection we can see instances of an emergent form of practical policy advocacy that is rooted in their day to day experiences of 'making it work' within the constraints in which they operate. Taken together, these emergent points of practical advocacy are creating change in the relationship between CBOs and funders. Engaging in funding-policy advocacy has implications that extend beyond the work of CBOs, creating opportunity for new visions of the relationships between state, society and citizens to flourish.

References

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