

## **ANSER-ARES Conference June 2011, Fredericton, NB**

### **Panel: The dynamic world of nonprofit organizations' advocacy work**

#### **Extended abstract - *Nonprofit organizations perceptions of their policy advocacy function and the advocacy environment in Canada***

By Gloria DeSantis, PhD

DRAFT May 16, 2011 – please do not cite without permission from authors

Gloria DeSantis, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow in socio-health and a sessional lecturer in the Graduate School of Public Policy and the Health Studies Program at the University of Regina.

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 perceive their policy advocacy role differently. This paper delves inside the advocacy processes described by 39 social service NPOs from Saskatchewan and seeks to answer the following two research question: a) how do NPOs perceive their advocacy function, and; b) what are NPOs perceptions of the advocacy environment in Saskatchewan specifically and Canada generally?

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 service NPOs have been influencing social policy development in Canada for decades (see for example Canadian Welfare Council, 1938; Curry-Stevens, 2006; Rice & Prince, 2003). A few of the policy outcomes influenced by social service NPOs offer us a flavour of this diversity and comprise: Aboriginal self government policies (Voyageur & Calliou, 2003); multicultural policies (Kobayashi, 2000); disability policies (Boyce et al., 2001; Prince, 2009; Stienstra & Wight-Felske, 2003); economic and social policies affecting women (McKeen, 2004); child care policies (Foster & Broad, 2002; Holly, 2009); anti-poverty policies (Marquardt, 2008; Silver, 2003), and ; affordable housing policies (Vaillancourt, 2008).

There are multiple types of advocacy undertaken by social service NPOs. Advocacy processes are often multidimensional, characterized by fluidity, comprise different phases, involve different constituents, contain varying degrees of unpredictability and intentionality, and are affected by myriad conditions that change and interact over time (Boris & Mosher-Williams, 1998; DeSantis, 2010; Mosley, 2009, 2010; Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Salamon & Lessans Geller, 2008). NPOs' perceptions of marginalized people, their own organizations, the NPOs around them, governments, and their communities, influences the type of advocacy undertaken (DeSantis, 2010). Advocacy may be undertaken as a single NPO, as an assembly of NPOs (e.g., a

coalition or network), may include marginalized individuals, and may include governments (ibid.). Advocacy forms vary depending on the socio-political nature of the jurisdiction where they are enacted (Enns, 2003). Policy advocacy includes a variety of strategies: direct lobbying of elected officials, grassroots lobbying, public events, media advocacy, research, judicial advocacy, public education campaigns, coalition building, government staff lobbying, voter registration and education, and expert testimony (Guo & Saxton, 2010).

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).

**The results show that NPOs have differing perceptions of their advocacy function.** In general, the data indicate that social policy advocacy initiatives have life cycles within which strategies are multiple and fluid over time. Thus labelling an advocacy initiative one thing and not another is problematic. At any moment in time, an initiative may be driven by a NPO coalition but then transformed into a round-table with government involvement. We are reminded of Kincheloe and McLaren's (2005) point - advocacy processes can be viewed like a flowing river "in which the exact contents of the water are never the same" (p. 319).

NPOs discussed advocacy in terms of visibility and scale. One group of NPOs stated they do advocacy but they do not talk about it, and they stated their advocacy is simply about them "voicing their opinion" and working behind the scenes or they are funded solely to do one-on-one advocacy. Another group of NPOs was more visible as they stated they "crack open that door a bit", their work is small scale, or they take a low profile. Yet another group of NPOs said their advocacy work was large scale, formal and visible. This included large NPOs and NPOs that operated on a province-wide basis and that also received either federal or provincial government funding to do policy advocacy targeted at another level of government. It also included NPOs that have joined province-wide networks/coalitions that did not receive government funding, but were quite visibly active in working to change government policies - and seemed to have no fear of government reactions.

Further, the analysed data show that NPOs tend to discuss their advocacy work in relationship to others. The data indicate that different NPOs have different perceptions of the marginalized people they serve, the communities in which they work, other NPOs around them, and governments with whom they must interact. These different perceptions affect whether NPOs engage in advocacy, to what degree, what type of advocacy is pursued, what strategies are adopted, and who gets involved.

**These myriad perceptions are connected to a variety of elements.** First, NPOs' sense of power to facilitate policy change appears to be important. Whether an NPO has a sense of power to build coalitions and/or mobilize the community, a sense of power to invite themselves to public policy meetings, and a sense of power to talk directly to elected officials as well as government staff, all appear to be critical. Second, NPOs' sense of vulnerability with its government funders and within its community, also appear salient. For example, if an NPO feels vulnerable about its funding relationship with a government department, its advocacy work is affected. Similarly if an NPO perceives some vulnerability regarding its value in its community, its advocacy is affected (e.g., an NPO that serves single mothers on social assistance that may not be perceived positively by the local community will choose different advocacy methods than an organization that works with disabled children and is highly valued by the local community). Third, NPOs' perception of the degree of permission they have to do advocacy has an impact.

Those NPOs that understand advocacy and lobbying rules in Canada tend to be much freer about engaging in advocacy without anxiety; other NPOs noted 'the CRA 10% rule' they must follow causes them worry. A number of NPOs indicated their belief that advocacy is a form of civic participation in a democratic country, thus it is permitted and it is their job to participate. Some NPOs also indicated they believe the NPO sector is an inherent part of Canada's welfare state, thus their voices are essential to policy deliberations. Fourth, NPOs' interpretation of their mandate, missions, and goals affects their advocacy work. Some NPOs were clear that they themselves must speak out and other NPOs were clear they have an obligation to bring marginalized people into public policy development processes. In general, advocacy appears to differ across NPOs, social policy areas, population groups, governments, and rural/urban areas, however, these qualitative data do not yield any clear patterns.

**NPOs' perceptions of the political and regulatory environments impact their advocacy work.** NPOs perceived that a number of issues related to the political atmosphere impacted advocacy. The dominant issue was that not much had changed in the political atmosphere across political parties over the past few decades in Saskatchewan as shown by the following quotes from respondents: "when the government is not responsive we see community action ...", "we've waited for them [NDP] to do the right thing by poor people ... these people are angry and frustrated", and "you've got to be vigilant and speak out no matter what government it is". Secondly, some NPOs thought governments had become more watchful of NPOs over the past few years especially given the Canada Revenue Agency 10% rule: "over the last 5 years ... government has become more concerned about agencies speaking out" yet back in the 1970s the government funded advocacy. However, there was one instance where this was not the case: the advocacy work undertaken by physical and cognitive disability NPOs in the 1970s has persisted to today with the assistance of a province-wide advocacy association representing 70 NPOs that receives government funding.

A number of implications stem from these results. First, NPOs' myriad perceptions of people and environments shape their advocacy work. Much Canadian literature states government rules and government funding create fear and silence in NPOs but these data indicate this is not always the case; "advocacy chill" may not be a direct result of these rules and funding arrangements, but it may be linked to NPO confusion about a complex administrative policy world. Second, NPOs perceptions of their functions, their place in the welfare state and their degree of legitimacy affect their relations with governments. Some NPOs clearly noted they have an expectation to dialogue with governments during policy development. Third, these qualitative data have implications for governance and democracy given policy advocacy is a form of civic participation and engagement.

## References

- Boris, E., & Mosher-Williams, R. (1998). Nonprofit Advocacy Organizations: Assessing the Definitions, Classifications and Data. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 27 (4), 488-506.
- Boyce, W., Tremblay, M., McColl, M. A., Bickenbach, J., Crichton, A., Andrews, S., et al. (2001). *A Seat at the Table: Persons with Disabilities and Policy Making*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Canadian Welfare Council. (1938). *A Study of Community Welfare Services in Saskatoon: Part I of a Report of a Survey Made by the Canadian Welfare Council for the Community Council of Saskatoon*. Ottawa, ON: Council House.

- Curry-Stevens, A. (2006). Rooting Social Policy Advocacy in Social Movements: Adapting to the Demise of Rationality in the Policy-Making Process. *Canadian Review of Social Policy* 56, 113-130.
- DeSantis, G. (2010). Voices from the Margins: Policy Advocacy and Marginalized Communities. *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research* 1 (1), 23-45. Available at <http://www.anserj.ca/index.php/cjnsr/article/viewFile/24/28>.
- Enns, H. (2003). Building Partnerships with International Advocacy Groups. In D. Stienstra & A. Wight-Felske (Eds.), *Making Equality: History of Advocacy and Persons with Disabilities in Canada* (pp. 301-319). Concord, ON: Captus Press Inc.
- Ezell, M. (2001). *Advocacy in the Human Services*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Foster, L., & Broad, D. (2002). *The Child Care Policy That Wasn't*. Regina, SK: Social Policy Research Unit, University of Regina.
- Guo, C., & Saxton, G. (2010) Voice-in, Voice-Out: Constituent Participation and Nonprofit Advocacy, *Nonprofit Policy Forum* (Vol. 1).
- Hall, M., & Banting, K. (2000). The Non-Profit Sector in Canada: An Introduction. In K. Banting (Ed.), *The Nonprofit Sector in Canada: Roles and Relationships* (pp. 1-28). Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Holly, G. (2009). Shifting Political Opportunities and Strategies: The Case of Childcare Advocacy in 2004-2006. In R. Laforest (Ed.), *The New Federal Policy Agenda and the Voluntary Sector*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Kobayashi, A. (2000). Advocacy from the Margins: The Role of Minority Ethnocultural Associations in Affecting Public Policy in Canada. In K. Banting (Ed.), *The Nonprofit Sector in Canada: Roles and Relationships* (pp. 229-261). Kingston, ON: McGill-University Press.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Marquardt, R. (2008). The Progressive Potential of Local Social Policy Activism. *Canadian Review of Social Policy* (60/61), 21-38.
- McKeen, W. (2004). *Money in Their Own Name: The Feminist Voice in Poverty Debate in Canada, 1970-1995*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Mosley, J. (2009). Institutionalization, Privatization and Political Opportunity: What Tactical Choices Reveal About the Policy Advocacy of Human Service Nonprofits. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* doi:10.1177/0899764009346335.
- Mosley, J. (2010). Organizational Resources and Environmental Incentives: Understanding the Policy Advocacy Involvement of Human Service Nonprofits. *Social Service Review* 84 (1), 57-76.
- Nicholson-Crotty, J. (2009). The Stages and Strategies of Advocacy among Nonprofit Reproductive Health Providers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38 (6), 1044-1053.
- Phillips, S., & Orsini, M. (2002). *Mapping the Links: Citizen Involvement in Policy Processes*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- Prince, M. (2009). *Absent Citizens: Disability Politics and Policy in Canada*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Rice, J., & Prince, M. (2003). *Changing Politics of Canadian Social Policy*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Salamon, L., & Lessans Geller, S. (2008). *Nonprofit America: A Force for Democracy* (Communique No. 9). Baltimore, MD: Centre for Civil Society Studies, Institute for Public Policy, John Hopkins University. Available at [http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/pdfs/LP\\_Communique/LP\\_Communique9\\_Advocacy\\_2008.pdf](http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/pdfs/LP_Communique/LP_Communique9_Advocacy_2008.pdf), accessed Nov. 25, 2009.

- Silver, J. (2003). Persistent Poverty and the Push for Community Solutions. In L. Samuelson & W. Antony (Eds.), *Power and Resistance: Critical Thinking About Canadian Social Issues*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Stienstra, D. (2003). Listen, Really Listen, to Us: Consultation, Disabled People and Governments in Canada. In D. Stienstra & A. Wight-Felske (Eds.), *Making Equality: History of Advocacy and Persons with Disabilities in Canada* (pp. 33-47). Concord, ON: Captus Press Inc.
- Stienstra, D., & Wight-Felske, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Making Equality: History of Advocacy and Persons with Disabilities in Canada*. Concord, ON: Captus Press Inc.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed. ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Vaillancourt, Y. (2008). *Social Economy in the Co-Construction of Public Policy*. Victoria, BC: Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships, University of Victoria.
- Voluntary Sector Initiative. (2001). *An Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector*. Ottawa, ON: Privy Council Office, Government of Canada.
- Voyageur, C., & Calliou, B. (2003). Aboriginal Economic Development and the Struggle for Self-Government. In L. Samuelson & W. Antony (Eds.), *Power and Resistance: Critical Thinking About Canadian Social Issues*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.