

We're Talking, But is Our Relationship Working? An institutional analysis of provincial government-voluntary sector relations

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of an institutional analysis of non-profit sector/government (NPSG) relations in provinces across Canada. This research is an extension of earlier research by this author which focused on non-profit sector/ government relations at a national level (Elson, 2008).

To fully address the question of what influences the on-going nature of non-profit sector-government relations, I contend that policy, regulatory and funding regimes, and institutions need to be examined from a historical institutional perspective. Institutions are shaped by history, and a historical perspective of institutions is critical to understanding contemporary policy shifts and drifts as well as the nature of institutional change (Hacker, 2005; Pierson, 2000; Putnam, 1993; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Thelen, 2003).

Institutional forms, and patterns of behaviour reinforced by those forms, outlast any individual policy actor. Politicians and policy advocates alike do not start with a clean slate, but operate within the constraints of the institutional forms within which they operate. A focused analysis of key aspects of non-profit sector-government institutional forms may reveal factors are crucial to developing a sustainable and positive policy relationship.

Research Framework

Historical institutionalism makes two primary assumptions: institutions shape politics and institutions are shaped by history (Putnam, 1993). The rules and operating procedures which make up institutions influence political outcomes by structuring actors' identities, power and strategies. Institutions embody both historical trajectories and the sustained impact of key turning points or critical junctures (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Pierson, 2000; Putnam, 1993).

Historical institutionalism embraces the idea that individuals act within institutional arrangements, the structure and function of which are only partially understood when the historical perspective is absent. The institutional organization is the principal factor which structures collective behaviour and generates distinctive outcomes (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Kay, 2005).

Methodology

Process tracing was used to identify the steps in the causal process leading to the outcome of non-profit sector/government relations in a particular case and in a specific historical context. Because process tracing connects the observation points to create a causal chain, it provides a means to identify how the independent variable (institutional regime type) leads to the outcome of the dependent variable (non-profit sector/government relationship status) (George & Bennett, 2005).

Analysis and interpretation

I have conducted a preliminary analysis of seven cases to date¹ (see Appendix A). I used this data to modify and establish conditions on the application of my institutional theory of non-profit sector/government relations.

Within each province, process tracing was conducted, drawing on source documents and secondary sources to analyze the mechanisms associated with institutional change; to identify the steps linking the critical juncture to policy change; and to assess the impact of

¹ British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

structure type on non-profit sector/government policy outcomes. Documentation of provincial consultation processes were examined; key informant interviews of both non-profit sector and government representatives were conducted; and relational surveys were examined for trends and developments over a three-to-five year period. At the same time an attempt were made to contextualize any changes within a broader socio-political context.

Key informants were selected on the basis of their known relationship to playing a leading representational role for the non-profit sector/ government in their province/territory. Elite semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior government representatives or ministers and leaders of provincial umbrella non-profit organizations. These interviews were designed to triangulate previous interviews; to gain new insights into the nature of non-profit sector and government relations; to verify written reports of non-profit sector/government relations; and to assist in the identification of the current institutional structure type. Specifically, interview questions were designed to assess the status of non-profit sector institutional structure type and perceptions of policy outcomes.

Institutional Structures

The institutional structures reflecting NPSG relations have been divided into three components: government structure, policy process structure and non-profit sector (NPS) structure.

Table 2

Structural Analysis
<i>Government Structure</i>
Policy structure Departmental representational forum
<i>Inter-sectoral Policy Structure</i>
Inter-sectoral policy framework Inter-sectoral representational forum
<i>Non-profit Sector Structure</i>
NPS representational structure NPS representational forum

Government structure

Government structure is comprised of three components: policy hierarchy (e.g. Minister, deputy minister or committee), departmental structure and inter-departmental institutional structure. Policy hierarchy reflects the extent to which there is a designated lead ministry with a policy minister (PM) and/or a dedicated or associated deputy minister (DM). In addition, this variable considers whether the positions are a dedicated non-profit sector portfolio or embedded into existing responsibilities. This signals the degree of formal political/ policy endorsement/ institutionalization and its subsequent reporting relationship to cabinet, government/ministerial committees or committees of deputy ministers.

The departmental structure is the operational aspect of this political/ policy endorsement. A secretariat or department can play a number of roles, including co-coordinating the liaison between the lead department and other departments within government; acting as a portal or gatekeeper for dialogue between the non-profit sector and government; and providing a dedicated forum for non-profit sector dialogue and consultation.

Policy structure

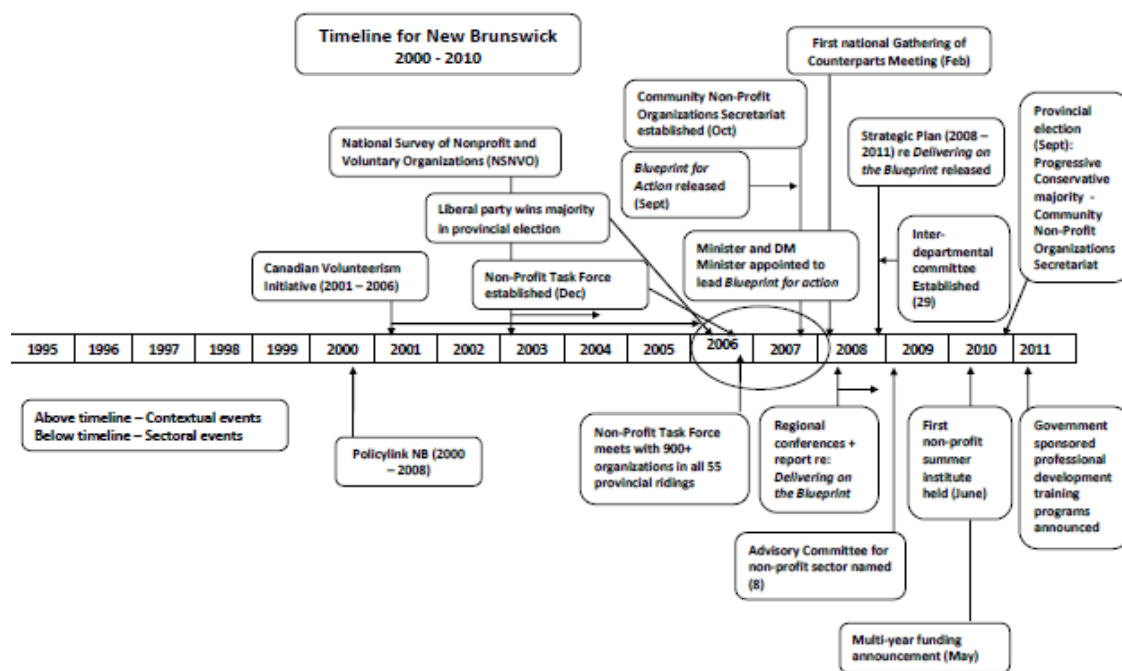
The policy process structure reflects the extent to which there is a policy framework in place to guide or inform NPSG relations. These are general principles and goals which inform the broad intention of NPSG relations. This can take the form of a formal collaboration agreement signed by government and non-profit sector representatives or a broad declarative policy statement issued on the part of the government. The third component of the policy process structure is the nature of the forum in which policy dialogue takes place. Most provinces to date have established either a non-formal collaborative discussion forum (e.g. BC, AB, PQ, NS) or an advisory committee to liaise with the lead secretariat (e.g. NL). In some provinces there are separate internal and external committees. The representation and reporting protocols for these forums vary, but are often non-formal. This non-formal structure serves both sector for different reasons. From the government's perspective it doesn't bind the government to enforce a decision through line departments unless subsequently approved by ministers. From the non-profit sector's perspective it provides an opportunity to discuss issues without having to broaden their existing representative constituency. The one province which does not have a dedicated policy process structure, Quebec, is the one with the most formal representative structure.

NPS structure

This structural analysis profiles the existence of a broad representative organization or 'representative' committee. In the case of a representative organization, representatives are internally designated. In the case of committees they are often nominated or suggested by leaders in the field and approved by a steering committee (BC), the government minister (AB),

or secretariat (NB, NS, NL). The second component of this structure is the existence of a dedicated policy forum within the non-profit sector.

The summations of these three components provide a framework for analyzing the relative formality of representation of the non-profit sector, government, and the forum for policy dialogue.



Results

A remarkable transition has taken place in non-profit sector/government relations at the provincial level has taken place in Canada in the last five years. Governments that saw the non-profit sector as volunteer firefighters and sports league coaches and delivery agents for meals-on-wheels have gained a fuller and deeper appreciation for not only the role that volunteers do play in communities, but also for the economic and social contribution of the non-profit sector as a whole.

Structural Analysis

Five of the seven provinces have an affiliated cabinet minister and a dedicated deputy minister. In British Columbia the Government Non-Profit Partnership Initiative (GNPI) operates at the deputy ministerial level and in Ontario the Minister for Citizenship and Culture has taken the lead on initiating a discussion concerning NPSG relations. In Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador an affiliated minister and dedicated deputy minister have been assigned the NPSG portfolio. The term affiliated minister is used because all ministers to date simultaneously hold other portfolios of which NPSG relations is often a minor part. Nevertheless, it does signal a clear intention by these governments that NPSG relations are valued (see Table 2).

To date, British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador have established a dedicated or bi-partisan secretariat within government. Only in British Columbia is the cost of the secretariat cost-shared with the non-profit sector. In all cases where a dedicated secretariat has been established, a deputy minister is either associated or dedicated to the task of overseeing the secretariat. The actual structure of the secretariat and associated non-profit sector advisory committees varies from province to province. Generally on-going and scheduled meetings between non-profit sector and government representatives take place, although the actual agenda, resource allocation and policy impact varies.

At this time government representation in these initiatives is more organized, resourced and institutionalized than the more generally non-formal non-profit sector. Existing structures within government are used as a conduit for internal policy dialogue. For examples, NPSG

relations issues are raised at standing deputy minister committee meetings. Seldom do government representatives on an inter-sectoral representational forum meet independently, although informal discussions with secretariat staff are common. These inter-departmental committees vary in size from four in Newfoundland, 18 in Nova Scotia, 29 in New Brunswick and 11 in Alberta. There is also variance in the level of representation from each department. As designated departmental representatives with reporting and representational structures in place, a formal institutional structure dominates the government representation.

The inter-sectoral representational forums vary considerably in size and are generally non-formal in nature. In BC, for example, the Government Non-Profit Partnership Initiative (GNPI) is seen as a 'policy think tank' rather than a forum for policy formulation. That is not to say that policy issues don't find their way to government policy tables, it's just that the connection is non-formal. With the exception of BC, the secretariats are funded by the respective provincial government. In BC a cost-sharing agreement is in place. Participation on these inter-sectoral representational forums also varies considerably. In BC, 97 government and non-profit sector representatives sit on five sub-committees and an additional 17 sit on a Leadership Council comprised primarily of senior sectoral representatives and government deputy ministers. In Newfoundland and Labrador nine sectoral and government representatives comprise a non-formal inter-sectoral accountability team.

The focus on these inter-sectoral representational forums is the identification and discussion and potential resolution of mutual issues. The extent to which these collaborative relationships flavour the very nature of the policy issues which are 'put on the table' is an important area for future investigation. Certainly that was the case with the Non-profit Sector Initiative on which these collaborative models seem to be based. These forums have not been a

venue for formal policy discussions for at least two reasons. First, it is politically expedient on the government's part to keep the discussions non-formal non-binding; and in no province, with the exception of Quebec, is the non-profit sector organized enough at this time to engage in sustained and sustainable policy dialogue.

The non-formal nature of non-profit sector representation has been a source of frustration for some government officials, particularly when representatives of the sector prefer to be simply 'representative' rather than 'representatives' of the sector. Only in Ontario and Quebec is there a collective representative structure which exists within the non-profit sector, independent of the inter-sectoral representational forum. At the same time, few resources have been allocated in any province to support the non-profit sector to self-organize. The core grants provided to both the Chantier de l'économie sociale and the Réseau québécois de l'action communautaire autonome since 2001 have made a significant difference to their representative capacity. To this point the budgets allocated with provincial secretariats in are primarily allocated to staffing and broader sectoral consultations. The purpose of this direction is to provide a portal for policy/ issue dialogue and a home for diverse sectoral representatives. Only in Quebec and to a certain extent in Ontario, do apex organizations play this role. In other provinces advisory committees act as a collective intermediary, but this is largely non-formal as these representatives are either approved by the provincial government or recommended for approval by a small group of sectoral leaders rather than being formal representatives of a collective constituency.

This relationship of formal and non-formal institutional structures has been summarized in Table 3.

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We're Talking

In British Columbia, Alberta, and Nova Scotia a formal collaborative agreement has been signed between representatives of the government and the non-profit sector. In Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick and Quebec, a declaration of intent to foster a constructive relationship with the sector has been made by the provincial government. The government of Ontario has recently declared its interest in developing a comprehensive and long term strategic action plan for its partnership with the not-for-profit sector (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2010).

Table 3: Structural analysis by province

Structural Analysis by Province	BC	AB	ON	PQ	NB	NS	NL
Identified time of shift	2007	2006	2010	1996	2006	2006	2007
Government Structure							
Policy structure (e.g. Affiliated Minister (AM) / Deputy Minister (DM))	DM	AM/ DM	AM	AM (2)	AM/DM	AM/ DM	A-M/DM
Departmental representational forum	Leadership Council	Department representatives on ANVSI	Ministry	Department representatives	Inter-departmental committee	Inter-departmental coordinating committee	Voluntary and non-Profit Secretariat
Institutional regime type	Formal	Formal	Formal	Formal	Formal	Formal	Formal
Inter-sectoral Policy Forum Structure							
Inter-sectoral policy framework	Collaboration Agreement	Collaboration Agreement	Policy Statement	Policy Statement	Collaboration Agreement	Collaboration Agreement	Policy Statement
Inter-sectoral representational forum	Government Non-Profit Initiative (GNPI)	Alberta Non-Profit & Voluntary Sector Initiative	Advisory Committee	Secrétariat à l'action communautaire autonome	Community Non-profit Organizations Secretariat	NS Volunteer Community Advisory Council	Accountability Team
Institutional regime type	Non-formal	Non-formal	Non-formal	Formal	Non-formal	Non-formal	Non-formal
Voluntary Sector Structure							
Voluntary Sector representational structure	GNPI	ANVSI	ONN	RQ-ACA/ Chantier	Advisory Committee	Advisory Council	Accountability Team
Institutional regime type	Non-formal	Non-formal	Non-formal	Formal	Non-formal	Non-formal	Informal

These consultations tend to be discussions with policy implications which are then taken into consideration by government officials, rather than a forum where a policy agenda is formally defined and positions presented which then see actions taken. The impact of these deliberations depend to a significant extent on the representation at the table and this varies considerably. There is the greatest concentration of deputy ministers or the equivalent senior bureaucrat around the table in British Columbia. In other provinces the representatives tend to be executive

directors or managers. The policy focus is generally on generic sectoral issues such as insurance, human resources, and funding practices and specific sub-sector issues are independently pursued by representative organizations with the most appropriate ministry.

For the most part these broad policy issues are still under negotiation, given the short time that these collaborative forums have existed. New Brunswick, which defined a very specific policy agenda and implementation timetable in the *Blueprint for Action*, has moved ahead with multi-year funding pilots and a sector skills development workshop.

The non-formal nature of these deliberations provides a non-threatening atmosphere for policy dialogue, but if the Voluntary Sector Initiative is again a case-in-point, the policy impact may be limited due to political or contextual factors outside the inter-sectoral representational forum. Again, I must emphasize that it is premature to come to any conclusion in this regard, given the relative short time period these inter-sectoral representational forums have been operating.

Conclusion

The evolution of non-profit sector/government relations at the provincial level has and is undergoing a remarkable change. Some of this change was driven by the mutual recognition that a substantial and unnamed relationship already existed, brought to light by the NSNVO and other Non-profit Sector Initiative funded activities and events. The collaborative nature of the Non-profit Sector Initiative appears to dominate the context in which policy dialogue structures to date have been designed and implemented. At this point it is an inter-sectoral representational forum which is politically non-threatening and fitting for a non-profit sector which operates in a non-formal representational structure. Other research (Elson, 2011) would suggest that this collaborative policy structure will favour the more formal of the two

institutional structures, that is, government. The non-profit sectors across Canada have yet to utilize these collaborative policy forums to increase the formal structure of their own representation. Time will tell if this is the beginning of a new future or a case of history repeating itself.

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