

Valuing Volunteering Without Recognizing the Reality of the Voluntary Sector

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In November 2002, Saskatchewan Premier Lorne Calvert released *The Premier's Voluntary Sector Initiative: A Framework for Partnership between the Government of Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan's Voluntary Sector*.¹ This is the province's own version of the federal government's Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) announced in June 2000.² Many other provinces, like Saskatchewan, are currently undertaking work related to their government's relationship with their voluntary sector. In Saskatchewan, one of the intended purposes is to increase the awareness of the value of voluntary sector activities to the overall well-being of all citizens.

The stated intentions of the Premier's VSI are commendable in wanting to develop an open, collaborative, sector-to-sector relationship between the public sector and the so-called voluntary sector. The document deserves kudos as well for affirming (in the "background" section) the importance of "understanding Saskatchewan's sectors and their relationships" (p. 3). It stresses that the two sectors interact continually, need to enter into a dialogue, and that government could not do without the accomplishments of voluntary sector, particularly in the fields of health and social service delivery. This is recognition that service delivery in these domains is not fully addressed within the public sector alone.

Among other positive and noteworthy contributions of the document is its emphasis on the idea that the cooperative sector, which is so important in the province, falls partially within the voluntary sector and partially in the private, for profit sector. In addition, we find in this document an interesting outline of the historical role played by community-based organizations (CBOs)³ in the provision of health, social and other community services in Saskatchewan.

The province has a very strong tradition in volunteerism. Saskatchewan has

the highest percentage of volunteer participation in Canada with 42 per cent of Saskatchewan residents aged 15 and older who volunteer on an annual basis (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2000, p. 36). As Debbie Pearce once stated: “volunteerism, as an individual and collective activity, has always woven, and continues to weave, a vital thread through the social, cultural, economic, and political fabric of Saskatchewan” (Pearce, 1989, p. 1). The emphasis on volunteerism in the Premier’s VSI can be clearly seen in the definition proposed for the sector which gives a great deal of importance to the fact that voluntary organizations are governed by volunteer boards of directors, and much less to the reality that many of these organizations must rely also on professional paid staff to carry out their work. This is the flaw at the heart of the initiative that is aiming at formalizing the long-standing relationship between the province and the thousands of organizations that comprise the voluntary sector in Saskatchewan. Despite its strengths, however, the document rapidly shifts emphasis from the voluntary sector to volunteers. Moreover, it does not go as far as to acknowledge a place for the voluntary sector in the public policy making process that is still described as the sole prerogative of government.

While we agree with the importance of establishing a respectful, and formal, communication between the public and voluntary sectors, it is necessary to start this dialogue on an inclusive basis by recognizing the services delivered and the support provided by the sector as a whole, including advocacy activities. We can hardly understand the role of volunteers and appreciate their involvement in the sector without paying attention to the other key actors in the sector with whom they interact. Hence, the dialogue that is now beginning between the public and voluntary sectors must not be framed in such a way as to avoid the tough issues at stake, but rather should be framed in a spirit of inclusiveness that places all key issues on the table for a constructive debate. Based on our research, we are of the opinion that this needs to be done as we embark upon a Post-Welfare State era in which new models of social policy and social contracts are emerging. While the nature of these arrangements is not yet clearly defined, it almost certainly will include a re-discovery of the role of the voluntary sector.

The current interest in rethinking the relationships between the State and voluntary organizations is leading some governments to consider new forms of governance that would take into consideration the voluntary sector as a key element in good governance (Laforest & Philips, 2001). The Premier’s VSI can be part of this trend and represent a genuine opportunity to revisit the bases of the present interactions between the State and voluntary organizations and envision how these interactions should look in the future.

This requires the recognition of the voluntary sector as a sector in its own right, with its own culture—a culture that is founded on the solidarity of its participants, on the (albeit imperfect) democratic organization of work, and on the participation

of the consumers (users of services). For the moment, there are still serious gaps between the vision of the Premier's VSI and the reality of the sector. It is hard for us to understand how volunteers can be recognized without recognizing the organizations for which they volunteer! Yet, focusing on time involvement by individuals in organizations avoids the need to focus on such issues as working conditions in voluntary organizations.

In April 2003, the Government of Saskatchewan began the second phase of its VSI (the first one ended with the drafting of the *Framework for Partnership*). The Government reappointed the Steering Committee which worked over the last year on laying the foundations for future action. We suggest that in this second round the players from both the public and voluntary sectors should consider some major issues where we need to seek clarifications to arrive at a better common understanding of the contradictions between paid and unpaid work in the voluntary sector.

The Steering Committee should provide a significant place for voluntary organizations and ensure that their role goes beyond consultation. Currently, the initiative (as suggested by its name) can be perceived as a top-down enterprise. We hope that the appointment of a Vice-Chair from the United Way will help to put the voluntary sector organizations' agenda on the table.

In our view, some of the issues that need to be dealt with are related to shared responsibilities, funding, people's involvement in the sector, the autonomy and diversity of organizations, and the interaction with the State. Recent changes in the welfare state require an increased focus on shared responsibilities between the public and voluntary sectors that necessitates building a new partnership model based on shared values, expectations, and outcomes (Austin, 2003). Shared governance will be crucial, for instance, in designing the "outcomes based accountability model" mentioned in the Premier's VSI (p. 13). Currently there is much talk about shared governance in the area of social services where the government of Saskatchewan holds more than 600 "service contracts" with about 500 CBOs employing between 2,500 to 3,000 people. This is larger than the size of the department's own regional delivery structure. CBOs have to be the primary interlocutors in establishing this accountability model, in defining the "outcomes," their measurements and operationalization.

The second round of discussions must include representatives from the different sub-sectors of the voluntary sector in order to better understand the diverse traditions within the sector. For example, the recreational, environmental, social services sub-sectors have different needs for using volunteers, as well as professional paid staff. It is imperative to recognize diverse traditions and practices so that we can identify strengths and weaknesses within the sector. Some sub-sectors rely heavily on government funding to operate and call upon professional paid staff and managers for service delivery. Other sub-sectors receive relatively little government funding and rely mostly on volunteers for their day-to-day

operations and only use professional paid staff for coordinating specific projects. If we avoid talking of these differences within the sector we risk blurring the discussion and misunderstanding the interaction between professional paid staff, managers, volunteers, users of services, and communities at large.

A serious discussion has to be initiated around the recognition of the role of paid staff and managers (many of them women) in the sector who have sub-standard working conditions. Community-based workers who work in settings like women's shelters, daycare facilities, and mental health agencies are paid between \$8.00 and \$9.00 an hour (Kyle, 2003). For their part, many Executive Directors who are well-educated work many unpaid hours every week in community-based agencies that often cannot offer them basic benefits such as a pension plan (Thériault, 2003). While these people are not volunteers themselves, the so-called voluntary sector (that is said to employ 1.3 million people in Canada) could not function without them. Volunteers need a structure to organize themselves, especially in the delivery of human services. In many social service agencies (such as those providing services to the persons with disability) it is the professionally trained staff, not the volunteers that provide the front line services to the at-risk clientele. The issues of recruitment and retention, identified in the document for the volunteers, will also be paramount in years to come with regard to the paid staff of agencies and their managers as the baby-boom generation is approaching the retirement age.

To sum up, Framework for Partnership is a valuable first step in establishing a necessary dialogue between the State and the voluntary sector. However, the proposed framework for partnership remains, in our view, misdirected by focusing mainly on the need to pay tribute to the contributions of individual volunteers, without touching on many of the key issues that need to be addressed in order to genuinely recognize the value of voluntary sector activities, particularly in human services. As mentioned earlier, this process has to be inclusive and this means embracing the sector as a whole. The initiative should avoid the "volunteering trap," which narrows the focus to volunteers only.

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Notes

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1. This document is available at: www.cyr.gov.sk.ca/PDFs/VSI.pdf.
 2. See: www.vsi.isbc.ca.
 3. CBOs in Saskatchewan designate non-profit organizations within the voluntary sector that are providing health and human services.

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