

POLICY GRASS ROOTS

**CONSULTANT'S REPORT ON ELEVEN VSI POLICY WORKSHOPS
HELD IN ALL PROVINCES JANUARY-MARCH 2002**

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Purpose of this document

This is a report from the point of view of the consultant who provided the presentation and facilitation services for a series of eleven one day policy workshops held with voluntary sector representatives in each province in February and March 2002. The objectives of the workshops were to:

- provide voluntary sector representatives with a basic understanding of the federal policy making process, and
- facilitate their sharing and developing tools and strategies for contributing to policy making.

Context

The Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) is a joint venture of the voluntary sector (VS) in Canada in partnership with the Government of Canada organized around a set of Tables. The Capacity Joint Table's (CJT) work is focussed on three areas: human resources, research and information sharing, and to improve the voluntary sector's capacity to provide input into policies of the federal government. For more information on the VSI see their website at <<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca>>.

The impetus for the CJT to provide these workshops came from a widespread demand among voluntary sector organizations (VSO) for a better understanding of the government policy process. The workshops were organized by a lead local voluntary organization with the support of the VSI Secretariat. Each workshop was followed the next day with a one-day consultation on the VSI project with a larger audience of local and regional VSO representatives organized by the VSI Secretariat.

Participants

Demand to attend the workshops was very high in all regions. In order to ensure good participation each workshop was limited to approximately 18 participants drawn from a cross-section of VSOs in that region. The VSOs represented ranged from small entirely volunteer run organizations to large umbrella organizations and included all parts of the voluntary sector (health, disabilities, arts, sports, environment, food banks, homeless and other groups at risk, etc.). About half of the workshops included two or three representatives from federal and provincial government agencies who work closely with VSOs.

Workshop Agenda

The first workshop in Toronto served as a test for the workshop agenda and led to a refinement of the agenda so as to provide a fifteen minute overview of the VSI project, one and a half hours given to presenting the policy process, and the balance of the day to developing VS policy tools and strategies in small groups. The agenda worked well for the other ten workshops across the country. The Montreal workshop was conducted in French by an alternate presenter/facilitator and also worked well. Participants were provided before the event with a copy of the publication 'Making Policy: a Guide to the Federal Government's Policy Process'.

The agenda for the workshops was as follows:

1. Introduction by local host and organizer of the event.
2. Self-introduction and interest in the event by each participant.
3. Presentation on the nature of the VSI.
4. Ideas from participants on how to define policy.
5. Presentation of the policy marketplace and process based on 'Making Policy'.
6. Case study by a local VSO on tools used to contribute to policy.
7. Sharing among all participants on tools they have used to contribute to policy.
8. Brief presentation of visionary examples of public policy from international sources.
9. Breakout groups of 4 to 6 people develop policy scenarios; including defining an issue, research plan, policy options and analysis, and a strategy with tools & tactics for moving the proposal through the policy process.
10. Presentation of proposals by breakout groups.
11. Round table discussion of the proposals.
12. Summary conclusions from all participants on the results of the day.
13. Thanks to organizers and closing.

Evaluation forms were completed immediately after the closing.

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS BY PARTICIPANTS.

The workshops were highly successful as measured by participants' comments during the workshop and their written evaluations. Evaluations for 'value' were consistently in the range of 4.5 to 4.9 out of 5 after the Toronto workshop which was about 4.2.

The comments are organized according to their place in the workshop agenda.

Self Introductions & Interests

A majority of participants indicated that they came hoping to learn how to influence government staff and politicians and their decisions...but readily accepted that the focus of the workshop was on learning about the nature of policy and the overall policy marketplace and process that would serve as an orientation and foundation for working with governments in all respects.

A significant minority of introductory statements indicated a loss of trust in 'this kind of consultation' and/or came hoping to grapple with particular issues such as rulings re charitable status by the Canada Customs Revenue Agency. These concerns were temporarily set aside once the workshop objectives and agenda were presented and discussed.

Briefing on the Voluntary Sector Initiative

Participants were impressed with the considerable commitment the government has shown to creating a true partnership with the voluntary sector and the size, funding and comprehensive nature of the VSI.

A minority of participants had not heard of the VSI before being invited to the workshop and indicated they needed this briefing to understand the objectives and organization and activities of the VSI before being able to focus on the policy workshop.

Defining Policy

The facilitator drew out and combined a variety of definitions and ideas for the nature of policy before pointing out the concepts offered in 'Making Policy'. Concepts that were suggested by participants for defining policy included; direction, principles for action, goals and pathways to them, parameters and boundaries for decision-making, collective values, a course of action, etc.

Presentation and Discussion of the Policy Process

Participants in every workshop said clearly that the presentation and subsequent discussion demystified and provided much needed intelligence on the nature of policy and the policy 'marketplace' and process.

"This is a good start on what we need to participate effectively".

" We badly needed this briefing"

"We now feel empowered to participate in policy making and eager to learn and do more on this topic."

Participants said that they were quite glad they been given this briefing and that they had gained a basic overview and important understanding of the following:

- The nature of – especially the complexity and flexibility - of the policy marketplace and its processes.
- The difficult roles and responsibilities and limitations of politicians and public servants.
- The federal government is faced with balancing the interests of hundreds of groups, restricted human and financial resources, many layers of accountability, which among other things tend to limit the governments' capacity for developing systemic vision and policy.
- The benefits and issues around the powers of the Prime Minister and his/her control of the policy system.
- The nature of the several categories of sovereign government in Canada and the difficulties that situation creates for making policy.
- The hollowing out of federal government's policy capacity since Program Review...that has created an opportunity for more policy inputs and leadership from the voluntary sector.
- How to work with the complexity of the policy marketplace to make many kinds of contributions from many perspectives and starting points...and think and act strategically in making contributions.
- The inherent grass roots role of the voluntary sector in initiating policy ideas and bringing citizens together around those initiatives. "One could say that democratic government itself is an ancient product of voluntary action."

- In addition to helping VSOs gain access to the policy process - as it is - the government should undertake to change itself from within to better pro-actively engage the voluntary sector and all Canadians in making policy.
- The workshop reveals a lack of knowledge among citizens of both the structure and process of government in Canada...in part due to poor civics training in our schools. Several participants indicated they would try to introduce the 'Making Policy' publication into their local secondary and post –secondary education systems.

Sharing Tools Case Study and Discussion

These sessions asked participants to identify and propose tactical tools and capabilities for contributing to policy making. Over a hundred tools were identified in total by all participants that covered the whole policy process including;

- doing the seminal observation and research with the people and conditions at the grass roots level,
- developing systemic balanced policy proposals that include all stakeholder interests,
- preparing concise briefings that can be applied to the whole range of communication requirements and opportunities in the policy process,
- developing comprehensive, patient and persistent campaigns to create the knowledge and pressure to convince government to put an item on their policy agenda,
- developing multi-faceted campaigns to inject VSO perspectives and understanding into the policy process... including opportunities such as 'consultations',
- initiating and/or participating in multi-lateral consideration of policy options,
- congratulating government when it does the right thing, and,
- monitoring policy results and 'holding politicians' feet to the fire'.

About half of the workshops identified the need to recruit or train experts in government relations and public policy for VSO boards and staff so as to participate and compete on an equal footing in the policy marketplace.

The strategies and tools identified in the workshop(s) were seen as useful for working with all levels of government.

The Challenge from International Examples

This brief presentation showed how other countries - small and large - have created fundamental personal, social and economic growth by undertaking visionary systemic policies as well as policies driven by entitlement and fairness among groups and regions. The challenge presented to participants was to develop the capacity to contribute to broader systemic policies for Canada as well as taking initiatives on behalf of their client constituencies.

Breakout Group Policy Scenarios

Every workshop indicated that the small group exercise convinced participants that they had among themselves the fundamental grass roots intelligence and skills to participate in developing policy.

The work of the breakout groups and discussions of their presentations demonstrated a high potential capacity by the sector for developing comprehensive strategies and contributions to policy development. Topics chosen tended to be social issues such as accessibility, homelessness and support for single parents. A few groups chose light-hearted topics (e.g. pink ice-cream) that enabled them to focus their creativity on the generic strategies and tactics for creating a policy initiative and pushing it through the system.

Participants' Conclusions

The following points attempt to sum up the concluding remarks from each participant at the end of all workshops.

Despite coming from the same region and community many individuals and groups met for the first time...and agreed that they should come together much more from now on for all kinds of local, regional and national synergies as well as policy purposes.

The workshops created a new sense of empowerment and being qualified to participate in the policy game. Here are some quotes from participants pulled together from the workshop notes taken by VSI staff and the facilitator.

"Those of us lucky enough to have who attended the workshops will be able to make more focussed, balanced and strategic contributions in the future."

"This event has created the foundation for developing the inherent and potential role of the VS in national, regional and local policy making. "

"We are keenly interested in policy making as an art and discipline."

" Although we are missing some key tools and expertise we have found that distributed amongst us is a wide range of experience, strategic capabilities and tactics for policy development. That means we must find ways of coming together to share and develop our expertise in order to make a contribution commensurate with our inherent role in bringing grass roots intelligence, new ideas and innovation into the policy making system."

" We need to work with each other and governments in developing a comprehensive capacity for policy development at least as good as our international colleagues and competitors."

" Thanks for having us think through what we should do to influence and shape policy making ...and how to do it in a strategic pro-active systemic way as opposed to scattered reactions and singular interventions on behalf of our client groups."

" We see the necessity for the VS role in policy making to be more strategic and systemic and go beyond the current focus on advocating for particular client groups' interests. This approach sometimes leads to win/lose competition among voluntary organizations and forces government too far in acting as the ultimate arbiter of who gets what."

"We now understand that our participation in policy making requires strategic thinking and use of many tools including intensive and balanced multi-sectoral research, ideas, case-studies, solutions, and comprehensive succinct briefings on our positions ...as well as gut instincts and advocacy."

"We must help balance and integrate empathetic advocacy focussed on entitlement issues with systematic policy by design based on good research."

All workshops developed the sense that the voluntary sector has an inherent natural role in defining the policy agenda and developing policy initiatives. That role springs from its work by and with the ideas and issues of the country at the grass roots level. As a result the voluntary sector has both the responsibility and ability to participate in the whole policy process including:

- setting the policy agenda
- policy research and intelligence
- developing and analysing policy options
- shaping policy decisions
- fleshing out policy implementation at the program level
- monitoring and following up government commitments and program performance

"The voluntary sector must get more collectively organized to perform our vital role in formulating seminal grass roots policy ideas and priorities...and helping them get developed and considered. at all levels of government."

"We need to collectively organize and collaborate on a national basis to do the comprehensive research and design of policy options for consideration by government and other stakeholders. The mandate, organization, resources, work and influence of the Business Council on National Issues (BCNI) gives us a model to consider in that project."

" We have considerable interest in further training in policy skills...in order to participate and lead (sometimes) in policy making at all levels from national to local as well as for improving the quality of governance in our own VOs."

" We must add policy and government relations skills to our volunteer, board and staff base. Policy is just as important as managing volunteers, projects and money."

Some participants in all workshops expressed frustration about providing inputs to government policy making through 'consultations', then finding out that the policy was already formed and that the 'consultations' were in fact a vehicle for marketing and testing of a new policy. Those few genuine consultations to gather basic evidence and proposals are overshadowed by the majority that were seen –after the fact- as 'communications' to pave the way for pre-destined policies – or where other interests dominated the subsequent policy making. As a consequence many felt that the effort of pulling together their constituencies' views and developing their submissions were wasted because of what amounted to 'bait and switch' government practices.

Participants in most workshops expressed frustration with the heavy administrative burden of any relationship with government. They indicated that the credibility and usefulness of the government as a partner for the VS is severely undermined by the multi-layered, perpetually inconsistent, overlapping, application process, bookkeeping and accountability requirements of government.

"...takes up 85% of our paid staff time so why bother?"

On the other hand participants developed some appreciation for why governments are being forced into complex accountability arrangements by public outcries over perceived mismanagement of public funds.

With regard to Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA) responsibilities for granting, regulating and revoking the status of charitable organizations many saw CCRA's rules and interpretations as at odds with the purpose of the VSI.

"The VS is in some danger of being courted to partner in policy making by governments while being curbed or put out of operation by CCRA for the same or neighbouring activities."

"CCRA does not seem to understand the grass roots service nature of the VS...they seem to regard us as a bunch of political zealots".

The prospect of 'partnership' being seen as lower cost 'downloading' to a sector not really understood by more than a few officials in government was raised in many workshops.

The business sector can influence the government's policy agenda better than the VS through political donations and well-funded policy research from their perspective. Perhaps our best alternative currencies are intelligence and participation from the grass roots, high quality policy proposals, staff exchanges, and appealing to the volunteer side of business leaders.

CONSULTANT'S CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These are based on considerations formed from participation in all the workshops. All of the projects suggested here could be set up on interactive and connected web-sites serving as resources, virtual marketplaces, conferences, etc. Some of the following recommendations are being pursued by VSI activities under the VSI Accord.

1. Policy Participation Strategies and Tools

Participants in the breakout groups identified in total over a hundred tactical and strategic 'tools' for participating in policy making as well as approximately a dozen distinct approaches to policy strategy. These might be combined with further research and work to produce a publication containing:

1. A kit of tactical tools arranged along the policy development continuum from sensing and research....to design of policy options...to measures for advocating and influencing decision-making.
2. Two page written presentations of a range of 5 or 6 basic 'policy participation strategies' gleaned from the results of the workshops' case studies and breakout groups' scenarios.
3. Guidelines re the distinctions and limits of *political* versus *policy* activity and the implications for charitable status and CCRA...and other important guidelines for the interface between VOs and Governments.
4. Resource Sources, including publications, voluntary sector expertise, etc.

2. Principles and Codes of Practice

Participants' comments regarding their interaction with government departments and agencies imply that they have a 'command and control' as opposed to complementary partnership role with VSOs. Linked to this concern are the issues around consultations, communications, engagement etc., as well as enabling charitable VSOs to be a partner in policy development without jeopardizing their charitable status with CCRA. These factors point to the need for a new clear understanding on the respective (and respecting) roles of the voluntary sector and government. The VSI could undertake or sponsor the joint development of principles and codes of practice to guide the difficult questions inherent in the complementary relationships between governments and voluntary organizations. These might include the following areas.

- Consultations
- Participation in policy development
- Project Funding
- Service Delivery
- Paper-burden and accountability
- CCRA Interpretations

3. Collaborative Policy Training

The workshops showed that the VS, particularly among its younger members, is very interested in developing its policy capacity. The current gaps in policy capacity in the federal government are being met in many departments with the training and sudden immersion of a new cohort of policy staff. These two factors and groups could make dynamic partners in re-inventing the Canadian policy system. One benefit would be connecting policy intelligence chains and collegial networks from the grass roots up to national bodies.

The Policy Internship & Fellowships project under development is a good start toward such a project. The VSI could also consider initiating regional events for sharing ideas and experience and developing networks such as a 'Policy Ideas Marketplace' for every sector...social, economic and environmental, governance, etc. or region with participation targeted to the above emerging government and VS younger cohort. Ideally such events would be organized at very low cost by a bi-lateral network from both sectors. Perhaps VSI could initiate shared training for policy capacity in all regions of Canada in partnership with the Policy Research Institute, Regional Federal Councils, provincial governments, voluntary organization umbrella groups, etc.

In addition to the above training opportunities VSI might work with current senior policy staff in federal departments and VSOs to develop some ideas for joint informal exploration of policy environments, identification of policy ideas and priorities, monitoring of policy impacts, etc.

4. Continued Outreach

The evaluations and comments demonstrated that participants were convinced of the value and necessity for this initiative to be extended throughout their sector. This suggests that the VSI consider how to deliver a similar package of information and strategic thinking in a more comprehensive manner throughout the voluntary sector. Here are three ideas for consideration.

A. More policy workshops

Provide resources for more workshops requested and organized at the local level. This option would not incur any organizing, workshop staff support, or reporting costs to VSI. Consultants would work directly with the organizer to set up the event, including the case study, agenda, etc.

B. Train the trainers

A cadre of approximately a dozen VS volunteers drawn from all regions of Canada would be trained in organizing and delivering similar workshops in their region. VSI would cover the cost of the training and the materials to be distributed.

C. Linkage to Teachers

Many participants expressed interest in getting the 'Making Policy' publication into the hands of teachers. The VSI might consider developing a linkage with the Teachers Institute on Canadian Parliamentary Democracy attached to the Library of Parliament to achieve that end. That institute hosts 70 teachers each November for a week-long series of briefings, visits and access to learning materials. Their contact is Ted Buglas at 943-0712 or <education@parl.gc.ca>.

5. Collaborative National Voluntary Sector Policy Capacity

Most workshops put high priority on the need for the VS to collaborate on a national basis to develop the capacity to research, design and promote policy at a level commensurate with the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (until recently known as the Business Council on National Issues). While the voluntary sector should undertake such activities in a manner independent of government the VSI could undertake to build on the interest shown by supporting a project that would research, design and test alternative models for collaborative national voluntary sector policy capacity.