



REMARKS

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to

Ontario Nonprofit Network

Our Vision, Our Sector Forum

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It's a great privilege to be here today with my fellow panelists for this important event in the early history of the Ontario Nonprofit Network.

The non-profit sector is big, it's important, and it's vital to the health of our society and economy. But it's also fragmented and often poorly-organized.

The sector faces a number of challenges. It needs to increase its profile, professionalism, and effectiveness. And that can only be done by pulling together, by finding common cause, and by inserting itself into the policymaking process – an area where it has often been conspicuously absent.

Fortunately, the Ontario Nonprofit Network is making significant strides on all of those fronts, and I congratulate all of you for your well-placed efforts.

The relationship to policy-making and policy-makers is one of the most important issues facing the non-profit movement. The ONN itself grew out of the realization that Ontario's non-profits are under-represented in the halls of government. The sector will not be as successful as it should be without being better at capturing and holding the attention of government.

If we lose sight of this aspect of our work, we will one day look back with regret. We will see that our lack of involvement in policy development was a strategic error that undermined and eroded our effectiveness.

Influencing policy is a tricky business, but there is a huge payoff for doing it well. Good government policy can magnify the non-profits sector's efforts exponentially.

Think of the sheer size and might of government – its wealth, its reach, its infrastructure and its unique lawmaking authority.

With government applauding us and backing us, we can put the wind in our sails and achieve outstanding results. Without government support, it's like rowing into the wind, struggling to make even the smallest difference.

So how do we get our friends in government to listen to our voices?

We start by speaking their language, and that means talking about economic impact and demonstrating real, definable, and achievable results. We need to approach our political and policy leaders differently -- not by asking "what our country can do for us" but by saying "here's what can we do for our country."

I may be preaching to the choir, but we also need to think of ourselves as important. We are, after all, a big business.

The Canadian auto sector has always had the attention of our governments, as well as its ready support. That support (bailout) is now approaching something like \$13 billion. But based on its collective economic impact, the non-profit sector is arguably more important to our country's financial well-being.

The Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project – sponsored here by Imagine Canada – found that our country's non-profit sector accounts for 6.8 percent of gross domestic product. With the value of volunteer work included, that number rises to 8.5 percent of GDP or roughly \$80 billion.

By comparison, the automotive industry represents just 2 percent of our GDP and employs, depending on how you count, between 100,000 and 150,000 people nationally. Non-profit organizations – excluding health care, education and all part-time workers – create 373,000 jobs ... in this province alone. That's the equivalent of every man, woman and child in Halifax.

To give you some global context, as a percentage of GDP, Canada's non-profit sector is the second largest in the world, behind only the Netherlands. And you're probably wondering, so I'll tell you that the US ranks fifth.

As a sector – and as an industry – the first thing we have to do is state our economic role more clearly and emphatically. We must gather our facts and share our knowledge more broadly and strategically. We're doing more of both already. But I think we can do better.

If any organization is still making its case to potential donors, sponsors and investors (including government) based only on need and social impact, they should reconsider that approach. At a time when the national preoccupation is the economy, this is a filter we should also use to present our public positions.

The second thing we need to do better is increase our reliance on solid and compelling research. We need to have deep pockets of data every time we try to convince legislators to see things our way. Yes, heart-warming stories should always be in our arsenal, but they should illustrate a problem and point to a solution that is supported by facts and impact that can be measured.

It's not just a matter of collecting data from various credible and independent sources. Those organizations with sufficient scale and scope need to create and collect their own information.

The Ontario Trillium Foundation is doing more of this by using our reach, research and resources to support the sector with information that can help it advocate for itself. Let me share two examples with you.

Early this year, the OTF had in-depth conversations with more than 100 diverse non-profit organizations in Ontario. We asked what they were experiencing, what impact the

economic downturn was having on their communities, and how OTF can effectively help.

We heard about the impact of shrinking endowment funds and the challenges of increasing demand for services. On the other hand, we also saw some effective strategies for surviving and thriving in this economy.

Some of these included greater levels of collaboration, the diversification of funding sources, and creative ways of achieving efficiencies. Doing more with the same or less, in other words.

None of these challenges or positive stories was terribly surprising in retrospect. But we used this anecdotal research to turn our theories into far more compelling evidence-based conclusions.

The Foundation is already using these findings to target the grants that have the greatest potential to succeed and address particular challenges non-profits are facing now, and likely in the future.

A second example is the *Your Community in Profile* series commissioned by the Foundation and produced by Statistics Canada. These reports cover the 16 granting regions of OTF and focus on economic, social and demographic trends in each catchment.

Knowing the trends over time makes it easier to anticipate change and to address future needs. We encourage charitable organizations, governments and grant applicants to use this data as they plan programs and services to build Ontario communities.

This research does more than help OTF be more effective in our work; it enables non-profit organizations to be more successful in their work. Plus, it provides a more reliable platform to support their and our arguments to governments when it's time to seek their support.

Finally, the most important and possibly effective way to influence government policy and policymakers, is to do our jobs well and make sure our friends in government know about it.

We think of ourselves as their constituents. Well, perhaps we should be treating members of federal and provincial parliament as **our** constituents too – and very important ones.

Invite them get to know us better, but don't inundate them with information. Remember, there are tens of thousands of organizations competing for their attention.

And this leads me back to the power of collaboration. If you have one well-crafted brief submitted collectively by 1,000 organizations that will send a much stronger, more

coherent message than having 1,000 briefs submitted by a miscellany of self-interested organizations.

If you want materials to land on policymakers' desks, and not go straight in their recycling bins, a coordinated approach is the way to go.

As someone who has spent most of my professional career in government, I can tell you that policy decisions are often founded on familiarity with, and respect for, an approach that has achieved proven success at the community level.

Don't tell anyone I said so, but our governments are not exactly quick to foster innovation; they prefer safe and proven strategies.

An organization like Trillium Foundation, though we are a government agency, is not like government in this regard. We are a lot more tolerant of risk and more nimble in distributing dollars. OTF is often a "first-funder" for both new organizations and pilot projects. Our grants open doors to other opportunities, including government funding and support from corporate or other sources.

We also play a critical role as a catalyst with community partners. In fact, when we spoke to more than 100 organizations that I mentioned earlier, they wanted us to do things like take a greater role in sharing best practices and helping organizations learn from each other.

They wanted us to help leverage collaboration and reduce duplication.

They wanted us to work with partners and funders to leverage OTF grants.

And they want us to take a role in helping shape a coordinated approach to policymaking on behalf of the sector.

We played that role recently with the *Poverty Reduction Strategy* for Ontario, which references at least nine examples of initiatives supported by OTF grants. We believe those programs played a role – perhaps small, perhaps significant – in shaping the direction of government strategy.

The non-profit sector should have an ever-louder voice in guiding public policy. We are doing great and important work. We are a social and economic force. We have access to data that supports the value of our organizations and programs. We have a track record of success.

I think we also have an opportunity in this economy, when so many people, corporations, organizations and sectors are going to our government leaders with requests based on need, to go with a different message.

We can be the ones looking to our governments not for rescue, but for partnership.

The Ontario Nonprofit Network is poised, I think, to play an important role at this juncture. Your presence here today is a strong signal that the sector is getting its act together, that it is positioning itself to partner with government, not approach it as a supplicant, and help in the shaping of good public policy.

Thank you for inviting me to take part in this panel. I look forward to the other speakers and the discussion to follow. Most importantly, I am excited to see where we go next as a sector.