Engaging the Nonprofit Sector in Policymaking: Ways to Strengthen Government-Sector Relations  
(Draft October 2015)

Introduction

Solving large-scale, complex social problems can’t be done in silos; it requires leadership from government and the nonprofit and private sectors. Each partner brings a critical perspective and resources to the task of social and economic change. Working collaboratively can drive continuous improvement, spur innovation, and maximize our collective impact.

This document is intended to spark dialogue and action to strengthen government – nonprofit sector relations through improved consultation approaches. It provides an overview of the broad scope of the nonprofit sector’s work, opportunities to consult the sector throughout the policy and program cycle, and principles of engagement.

Ontario’s 55,000 community nonprofit and charitable organizations are dedicated to building thriving communities and a dynamic province (see Appendix for a profile of the sector). The nonprofit sector has a strong record of advocating for public policy and partnering with government to implement solutions in areas like eliminating poverty, protecting the environment, increasing access to affordable housing, and many others. The sector represents multiple perspectives, including employers (about half of nonprofits have paid staff), social entrepreneurs and innovators, and service deliverers. Nonprofits also represent diverse subsectors including arts, culture, sports and recreation, environment, social and community services, faith-based, housing, education, health, and law/advocacy/politics.

Nonprofit organizations contribute sector-specific expertise, on-the-ground experience, and local knowledge to inform prospective regulations, legislation, policies, and programs. The sector is also uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue with the communities it serves. When government effectively consults the nonprofit sector, policy options and decisions reflect nonprofits’ diverse expertise and the needs of the communities they serve. There is also better buy-in to policy and program decisions and implementation issues can be addressed proactively. This ultimately leads to better outcomes for Ontarians.
When should you engage the nonprofit sector?

Early engagement of key partners throughout the policy cycle provides time for nonprofits to research, consult their networks and communities, and in some cases develop consensus and identify shared priorities/recommendations. Figure 1 describes some of the ways the nonprofit sector can contribute at each stage of the cycle.

The reality is that time is not always on the government’s side and opportunities to move policy issues forward sometimes develop unexpectedly or with short timelines. This does not mean that government should not engage, but all partners have to be realistic about what can or cannot be accomplished. When government faces time pressures:

- Clearly communicate what is needed from the consultation process. For example, instead of asking for feedback on an entire piece of proposed legislation, focus on specific parts that require the input and advice of the relevant sector representatives.

- Proactively share information gathered from other partners the government is consulting – it helps to avoid repetition and moves the conversation forward.

Figure 1: Examples of Resources, Expertise, and Experience the Nonprofit Sector Provides throughout the Policy and Program Cycle

Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN)

ONN is the provincial network for the 55,000 nonprofit organizations across Ontario. As a 7,000-strong network, with a volunteer base of 300 sector leaders, ONN brings the diverse voices of the sector to government, funders and business to create and influence systemic change.
**CHECKLIST**

**Government should consult the nonprofit sector when it needs:**

- **Sub-sector specific expertise:** arts, culture, sports and recreation, environment, social and community services, faith-based, housing, education, health, law/advocacy/politics, philanthropy and grant making, volunteerism, and social economy

- **Sector governance expertise:** including the *Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act* (2010), government investment/financing, social procurement, social enterprise, and shared governance platforms

- **Employer perspectives:** about half of Ontario’s 55,000 nonprofits have paid staff. Core issues include labour force development, labour market information, wages and benefits, and skills and leadership development

- **Entrepreneur perspectives:** connect with social innovators and social enterprises, and develop business and technological solutions for government and the sector

- **Service delivery advice:** program development expertise, to test the feasibility of policy options in the real world, on-the-ground knowledge of local capacity, to identify partners for the policy implementation phase, and for feedback on existing programs/policies and outcomes

- **Community views:** nonprofits can facilitate access to the voices of people and communities actually experiencing the issues you’re trying to address, and share their local insights

- **Evidence and research:** access local, regional or provincial-level data, including data government officials may not know exists, and identify gaps in data collection and research

- **Risk assessments:** to understand the potential impact of proposed policy options on communities, existing government programs, funding arrangements

- **‘Cross-government’ thinking** on issues that cross ministry mandates/priorities

- **Buy-in:** meaningful cross-sector collaboration gives solutions credibility

- **Still not sure?** Ask your nonprofit sector partners or contact ONN and we’ll connect you to our network! ([www.theonn.ca](http://www.theonn.ca))
Principles to Guide Engagement

- **Respect the sector’s time and advice** – many nonprofit organizations lack capacity to have dedicated policy and advocacy staff, as a result, participants are often juggling multiple responsibilities (e.g. managing services or building social enterprises). Sufficient time ensures the process and the advice provided are meaningful.

- **Be purposeful** – share the outcomes government is trying to achieve and the constraints that are shaping the consultation process. Let participants know what their advice and ideas will be used for and when they can expect to see the impact of their involvement.

- **Be realistic** – the consultation process should match the complexity of the issues being explored. For example, a one-hour meeting with a large number of participants is unlikely to solve complex policy problems. Asking for feedback on a two-page brief or statement might be a better starting point.

- **Be transparent and provide feedback** - share information before and after the consultation to deepen the dialogue. This includes sharing notes or meeting summaries from prior consultations (including those with other sectors).

- **Embrace diverse perspectives** – the sector often represents multiple perspectives and positions on issues. Diverse perspectives may identify or anticipate issues and opportunities not previously considered.

- **Leverage policy networks that already exist** – nonprofits are collaborating and sharing information on policy issues all the time. Partner with existing networks of organizations, and leverage those connections to expand your network.

- **Be inclusive** – don’t rely on the ‘same old’ stakeholder list; government’s nonprofit sector partners should evolve over time. Include as broad a range of representation as possible (e.g. rural and urban, multiple communities/regions, multiple subsectors, small/medium-sized and large organizations, individuals of different ages and backgrounds). Purposely invite new partners from underrepresented groups.

- **Build lasting relationships** – meaningful relationships inspire reciprocity and make things happen. Proactively build government’s policy network at all levels of the organization. Encourage and support participation in external learning and development opportunities for all policy staff (including policy advisors, managers, and senior management). Invite sector contacts to ministry events, meetings where appropriate, set update meetings, and attend (policy) nonprofit events.

Build Partnerships Through Public Engagement

There is no ‘one size fits all’ strategy or method of consultation. The methods will vary according to the goals, timelines, and available resources. ONN supports a public engagement approach that fosters meaningful dialogue and partnership between government, the nonprofit sector, and the private sector. Incorporating a public engagement approach into government’s consultation strategies means*:

- Government and the sector are engaged as **active participants** in the dialogue (i.e. government is not a passive receiver of information from participants).

- Responsibility for identifying issues, solutions, and achieving outcomes rests with all partners and all partners bring resources to the table.
• Government plays **multiple roles** as a convener (bringing partners together) and a catalyst (for collaboration, shared leadership, and innovation).
• The process facilitates **relationship building**. Abiding by the principles of engagement builds trust and buy-in for the next stage of the policy/program cycle. As well, strong facilitation skills are essential, and an area where nonprofit sector leaders can provide support.
• Partners develop a **common language**. Use plain language and avoid jargon in supporting materials and during dialogue.
• To the greatest extent possible, partners focus on **progress over process** – real results keep partners engaged over the long-term.
• Government applies **lessons learned** to the next consultation.


**Getting Started**

1) Don’t wait until it’s time for a formal consultation – get started now!
   • Building relationships and identifying partners takes time and should start long before an official consultation is needed.
   • Be strategic – use informal interactions (e.g. meetings or external events) as opportunities to grow your network and enhance your capacity to partner with the sector.

2) Build on good things happening in government
   • Consult internally (within and outside your ministry) and externally to find out what works.
### Stakeholder examples of what has worked:

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<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>• Reflected partners’ input at each stage of the policy process (from issue identification through to proposed legislation, funding formulas, and implementation)</td>
<td>• Gathered advice from experts and people with lived experience (e.g. Condo Residents' Panel &amp; Expert Panel) - leads to buy-in</td>
<td>• Convened diverse perspectives from the private and nonprofit sectors</td>
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<td>• Used multiple methods of input: e.g. written submissions &amp; in-person meetings</td>
<td>• Focused on partnerships – government, experts, and non-experts worked collaboratively to identify issues, find and implement solutions</td>
<td>• Tailored the consultation to what is needed – in this case, 6 focused meetings to achieve specific tasks</td>
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<td>• Shared a discussion paper to frame the process, including: a summary of previous input/consultations, clear timelines and expectations, and specific discussion questions</td>
<td>• Contracted a facilitator with a strong track record of public engagement</td>
<td>• Facilitated workshops – to foster open dialogue</td>
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3) Reach out

- Get to know the vibrant community of subsector and regional networks that connect nonprofits across the province. A helpful resource is [211](#), an online database of Ontario’s community and social services.
- You likely already have partnerships with the sector, however on crosscutting issues or in cases where you are unsure where to start, ONN can help. Depending on the issue, ONN may be directly involved, play a role as a convener, or make referrals to sector leaders and experts.
FACILITATE PARTICIPATION BY A BROAD RANGE OF ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Nonprofit organizations are willing to invest its time, energy, and resources in the consultation process. However, half of the sector is volunteer-driven and the majority of organizations are small or medium-sized, which means that the capacity to participate varies across sector.

To maximize participation by the broadest range of organizations possible, government should make inclusion a priority and reimburse the costs of participation as much as possible. When planning consultations, consider the impact of travel time and costs, the timing of meetings (e.g. volunteers may not be available to participate during business hours), and using multiple forms of communication (e.g. virtual, teleconference, in-person sessions, written submissions) in multiple languages. Reimburse the costs related to sub-consultations, when nonprofit organizations are asked to convene members of the communities they serve to provide local or regional input to government. Actively offer accommodations for persons with disabilities, in line with the standards of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005).

4. Stay connected to what’s happening in Ontario’s nonprofit sector – Follow ONN: Twitter | Linkedin | Facebook | Blog | Youtube
Appendix:

A Profile of Ontario’s Community Nonprofit Sector

Ontario’s community nonprofit sector is made up of 55,000 nonprofit and charitable organizations (excluding hospitals, colleges, and universities). Community nonprofits (or public benefit organizations) are guided by missions dedicated to providing a public benefit good to communities across Ontario.

Community nonprofit organizations are rooted in communities across Ontario and vary in size, focus, and capacity:

- The sector is dynamic, subsectors include: arts, culture, sports and recreation, environment, social and community services, faith-based, housing, education, health, law/advocacy/politics, and philanthropic/volunteer intermediaries. This translates into a diverse array of activities and services, everything from soccer teams, symphonies, and places of worship to daycare centres, affordable housing, and employment services.
- Some are large, highly structured organizations, but the vast majority are small or medium-sized organizations.
- Research indicates that about two-thirds of Ontario nonprofits serve their local community, while about 1 in 6 organizations has a regional mandate.\(^1\)

Economic Impact:

- Contributes 2.6% to Ontario’s GDP, more than the automotive and construction industries.
- Economic activity by the Canadian nonprofit sector outpaces growth of the Canadian economy over 22%.
- Leverages diversified revenue sources – 45% of nonprofit income is self-generated, earned independently of government funding (29%), gifts and donations (37%), and other income (4%).

Social Impact:

- Nonprofit leaders have played a key role in identifying issues and advocating for progressive public policy, in areas like reducing impaired driving, eliminating poverty, improving employment standards and access to affordable housing, fighting illiteracy, increasing access to arts and recreation and many others.
- Nonprofits have a track record of developing on-the-ground solutions that improve the lives of Ontarians. A large number of organizations focus on serving the general public (42%)\(^2\), while others target unique populations (e.g. children & youth, immigrants, ethnic groups, people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, seniors, the unemployed).
- The sector provides opportunities for civic participation and social inclusion – attracting over 5 million volunteers who contribute 811 million hours annually to their communities.

\(^1\) The Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector in Ontario - Regional Highlights of the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations. (2006). p. 6. (Note: this statistic includes hospitals, colleges and universities).
\(^2\) Ibid. p. 7. (Note: this statistic includes hospitals, colleges and universities).
A Labour Force Leader – Talented and committed professionals lead the sector:

- The sector is a significant employer, providing 600,000 jobs.
- Data on paid employees in Canada’s nonprofit sector shows that about 1/3 are in professional occupations (more than in for-profit organizations) and nearly 60% have post-secondary education.³