

Grassroots and Governance: Exploring Connections Between Active Citizenship, Civil Society, and Governance in Canada

Summary Report

2009

Dr. Patricia Gouthro
Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia



Description of Research Study

This applied research study explores relationships between grassroots, community based organizations (CBO's), active citizenship, and governance in Canada. The study included case studies of six "grassroots" (initiated through citizen involvement) organizations, as well as interviews with several "key informants" from different regions (Eastern, Central and Western) Canada.

Summary of Research Questions

- What contributions do grassroots, community based organizations make to the broader Canadian society, culture, sense of identity, and economy?
- What factors motivate or deter volunteer participation in CBO's?
- What kinds of relationships exist between CBO's and government and between other community based groups?
- What is the relationship between active citizenship and participation in electoral politics in Canada?

- Are there gender differences in citizen participation?
- What are the supports and challenges facing CBO's in Canada?

Case Studies

Six “grassroots” community-based organizations in Western, Central, and Eastern Canada were selected to provide as diverse representation as possible. The case studies involved:

- examining literature (ie. websites, reports) related to the organization
- a site visit
- interviews with two or three members of the organization

The Organizations

- Chiliwack Hospice Society, Chiliwack, British Columbia
- The Ability Society, Calgary, Alberta
- Fareshare Food Bank, Oakville, Ontario
- Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County, Windsor, Ontario
- Association des Acadiennes (a collective of Acadian cooperatives) Chéticamp, Cape Breton (Nova Scotia)
- Oxfam Canada (Maritime Regional Office) Halifax, Nova Scotia

Key Informants

Two to three “key informants” were interviewed in each of the three regions (Western, Central & Eastern) Canada to learn more about the connections between government, community organizations, and citizens. They included:

- Politicians
- Policy makers
- Leaders in volunteer and not-for-profit sector

Summary of Findings

A thematic analysis was conducted using data from the interviews and research study. Five main themes that emerged are:

Motivation for participation

- varied reasons for being involved in CBO's
- some participants interested in advocacy, others want to make a contribution to their community
- personal connections to an organization may serve as a motivator, ie. prior experience as a Newcomer to Canada

- personal perceived benefits may be a consideration – ie. desire to remain active during retirement, meet people after moving to a new place, make a meaningful contribution if you have a disability that makes it hard to obtain paid employment

Changing nature of volunteer commitment

- concern that there is a decline in volunteerism and charitable donations
- volunteers often prefer intermittent, short-term involvement
- today people often choose volunteer work that benefits individuals that they are close to rather than the broader community ie. coaching kid's sports team
- concerns that citizens may feel a lack of engagement
- long term leaders and core volunteers are aging; worries that others will not take their places

Changing relationship of CBO's

- tensions because of scarcity of resources (both volunteers and funding)
- need for more government supports for networks if they are to be effective
- expectation by government that CBO's will work cooperatively
- yet circumstances creates competition that often undermines collaborative ventures

Relationship between CBO's and government

- financial dependency with government is often problematic
 - government funding often provides inadequate funding for administrative roles
 - inadequate funding to support proposal writing or fundraising activities
 - insecurity and inability to plan ahead because of lack of long term, core funding
 - inefficiencies created by excessive paperwork
-
- funding may not target programs or objectives the organization would prefer to focus upon
 - while most organizations remain largely dependent upon government funding, some opt out, and go directly to the community for support
 - one organization uses a model of "social entrepreneurship" whereby they provide services, often through government contracts

Participation in governance

- some participants thought advocacy was not part of their mandate
- others thought it might be beneficial to have more opportunities to discuss policy with government, but did not have time/resources to devote to it

- concerns were raised that political involvement could have negative financial repercussions regarding funding
- when organizations did engage in advocacy, it was often through higher levels (ie. provincial office) if it was a branch of a larger organization, or through a network a network of similar CBO's, unless the organization had a specific activist mandate
- concerns raised around “political literacies” – do citizens have a clear understanding of how to advocate for change

Recommendations

- need to address policies around creating more “core funding” for CBO's to support administration and enable long term planning
- develop supports for training and recruiting volunteers
- consider financial incentives (ie. tax breaks for higher income volunteers/ philanthropists, revenue supports for lower income volunteers)
- explore options for creating linkages between formal education sector and CBO's to increase volunteerism
- consider how citizenship can be incorporated into curriculum discussions in formal learning contexts
- create opportunities and spaces for democratic dialogue to encourage the development of political literacies for members in the community
- enhance supports for networks for CBO's that can provide training, opportunities for dialogue with members of government, and advocacy in the policy sector

For further information and publications on this study go to:

www.patriciagouthro.ca