# ENHANCING POLICY LEADERSHIP FOR CANADA'S CHARITABLE & NONPROFIT SECTOR: A CONVERSATION STARTER

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Canada's charitable and nonprofit sector must play a much more influential role in public policy on a pan-national scale if it is to be a serious player in post-pandemic rebuilding and in addressing the complex issues of climate change, reconciliation, racial justice, structural inequalities and reinventing our systems of care. It needs to create much greater public visibility and establish a new narrative about its size, strength and ability to innovate. This demands a strong sector-wide voice, an ability to set policy agendas to meet the needs of those it serves, and a capacity to effectively engage with governments.

This paper is intended to start a national conversation about how to build strong cross-sector leadership – potentially as a new alliance, 'intermediary' or organization or as strengthening existing bodies. The proposed role of this leadership entity is to:

- Mobilize the sector and participate in public policy;
- Use research to advance knowledge of policy issues affecting the sector;
- Promote learning and inclusion across the sector;
- Facilitate partnerships and collaboration; and
- Be a voice for and create visibility and public understanding of the sector.

We seek to generate open and expansive dialogue that considers different options for a leadership mechanism, focusing on several key questions:

- What kind of structure and processes would best facilitate this work?
- Is this a new mechanism or an existing one made stronger?
- How would it get started and sustained?

This paper first makes the case for a cross-sector leadership vehicle. It then identifies the strengths, shortcomings and tradeoffs of different models of sector leadership based on the international research literature and on experiences in Canada and elsewhere. We then pose a series of questions as a guide for sector leaders to assess how they would like to build and engage with a new/renewed leadership mechanism.

This project is initiated and supported by the Muttart Foundation and the Max Bell Foundation to help the sector and its leaders not only build back better from COVID-19 but also become more effective agents of change over the long term.

# ENHANCING POLICY LEADERSHIP FOR CANADA'S CHARITABLE & NONPROFIT SECTOR: A CONVERSATION STARTER

*The very concept of a charity carries with it an obligation for policy advocacy that sets charities apart from the private and more broadly defined nonprofit sectors. In short, charitable status confers a privileged position that comes at a price: that charities necessarily assume a moral obligation to pursue the public good. (Gibbins, 2016)*

## STARTING CONVERSATIONS

This discussion paper is intended to start multiple conversations about how Canada's charitable and nonprofit sector can be more influential in public policy on a pan-national scale. The sector can – and should – contribute its hands-on knowledge of communities and issues to help all levels of government with post-pandemic rebuilding (Gibbins, 2016; Houston, 2021; Lauzière, 2021; Northcott, 2021). In addition, the sector should be part of policy making processes over the long term to address complex issues of climate change, reconciliation, racial justice, structural inequalities and reinventing our systems of care, among others. This demands a strong sector-wide, pan-Canadian voice, an ability to set policy agendas to meet the needs of those it serves, and a capacity to effectively engage with governments.

Too often, charities and nonprofits are seen by governments as just service delivery agents, not as innovators who have solutions for complex human, social, and environmental problems. Often, charities and nonprofits undervalue their potential and see themselves only as service providers. Yet, the sector is full of people who are innovators and change-makers – who see problems and say "I'm going to do something," instead of "I wish someone would do something." It's time for the sector to use this thinking to build stronger relationships with governments to produce better policies and programs for all Canadians.

This project is initiated and supported by the Muttart Foundation and the Max Bell Foundation to help the sector and its leaders not only build back better from COVID-19 but also become more effective agents of change over the long term.

The basis for this conversation-starter is not a criticism of existing organizations such as the umbrellas representing specific subsectors, various provincial/regional networks, Imagine Canada, or a variety of emerging informal networks. Rather, it is a recognition that the task of being taken seriously in public policy is huge (beyond a single province or subsector) and organizational capacities are stretched. The existing organizations and networks should not be sidelined, but their work supported, complemented, and amplified. However, if the sector is to have a voice as a *sector* – as does big and small business and the energy sector – there also needs

to be a strong, coordinated, sector-wide leadership mechanism for charities, nonprofits and philanthropy.

A fundamental principle is that a new, or renewed, leadership body must be *by and for* **the sector**. Its credibility will hinge on its relationship with the sector – in all its diversity. As a leadership body *for the sector*, it must be closely connected with, able to readily communicate with, learn from and be accountable to a wide diversity of organizations and constituencies that constitute the sector. How the individuals in leadership positions come to be appointed as leaders – *by the sector* – will also matter. The entity we imagine is not a self-declared group of individuals, but an entity with deep two-way relationships with sector organizations.

Being *by the sector* means that this body would not be appointed by government, thus lacking direct accountability to the sector. While the Advisory Committee on the Charitable Sector (comprised of individuals, some from leading sector organizations) provides valuable input on regulatory matters to the Minister of National Revenue and the Commissioner of the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), it exists at the pleasure of the government, rather than being created by the sector. The approach discussed in this paper presumes a sector-led body that would engage policy issues including but extending beyond charity regulation and beyond the federal government.

## THE NEED FOR SECTOR-WIDE LEADERSHIP

There is no question that Canada requires effective public policies and a highly capable nonprofit sector to address the many serious challenges facing the country and the planet. The nonprofit sector needs a strong voice in public policy at all levels of government – leadership that demonstrates the sector's strengths and how it can be a partner in solving complex social and environmental issues. To do this, it must come together as a *sector* with a collective voice and a demonstration of its expertise, capabilities and cohesion.

Because governments have a limited understanding of the nonprofit sector and how it serves communities, they regularly make poor policy, regulatory and program decisions affecting the sector. The difference in how the federal and provincial governments responded to the challenges faced by small business versus charities and nonprofits during COVID-19 is a good example. Policy makers readily understood and responded to the challenges faced by small business which were articulated well by its peak association, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. In contrast, charities and nonprofits – as employers and as organizations delivering essential services – were not initially mentioned as being in need of assistance.  An organized letter campaign and regular engagement by Imagine Canada eventually led to

inclusion in vital support programs and in adapting those programs to the sector's specific circumstance (Barr and Johnson, 2021).

The design of the $453 million Canada Student Service Grant (CSSG) is a further stark reminder of how federal policy makers are out of touch with the sector. A working knowledge of the sector would have quickly dispelled the unrealistic idea that up to 100,000 students could be hosted by charities and nonprofits in paid 'volunteer' positions during the pandemic when 40 percent had already laid off staff and remaining staff were mainly working from home (Ayer et al., 2020).

The lack of visibility and understanding of the sector extends to the media and the public. It shows up in stagnant rates of giving and volunteering over the past decade (Lasby and Barr, 2018). The further decline of trust in the sector that followed the CSSG - WE Charity scandal (Angus Reid, 2020) may be temporary or could dampen giving and volunteering over the longer term, which would seriously hamper efforts to build more inclusive, equitable communities. This, coupled with an impending severe labour shortage and the need for new skills for a digital transformation (Statistics Canada, 2021a), will put the sector at a competitive disadvantage in attracting needed new talent and leaders.

These challenges call for concentrated efforts that will: 1) enhance the sector's impact on public policy and innovation; 2) increase its public visibility, trust and credibility; and 3) establish a more connected, inclusive sector based on greater intra-sector engagement.

## GREATER IMPACT ON PUBLIC POLICY

The key role of a new or strengthened leadership body would be to pursue the public good by providing sound, evidence-based policy advice to governments and by making stakeholders and the public more informed about relevant issues. Such engagement contributes to more vibrant democracy, engaged citizenship and more equitable public policies and programs.

Being a respected, influential participant in public policy begins with inclusive, cross-sector engagement so that the sector can better speak with a collective voice on important issues. This entails participation of a diversity of organizations and leaders – particularly those often marginalized within the sector – to learn from each other, build common ground and join together as sector. It also needs to be supported with data and policy research and active involvement in key policy, budgeting and regulatory processes.

Finding a collective voice is not easy in such a diverse sector, and is exacerbated by provincial/territorial jurisdiction over health, social services and education which fragments advocacy efforts and frustrates pan-Canadian coordination on many issues. But, it's time to overcome fragmentation and find greater unity in diversity.

Many hope that a 'home in government' will provide the needed voice for the sector: this is only a partial solution. To realize its potential, a home in government requires a counterpart in the sector that serves as a 'transmission belt' (Albareda, 2018), facilitating two-way exchange of ideas, priorities and feedback. Unless the nonprofit sector can readily open doors to the home in government, the resulting policies and regulation will likely continue to be faulty, but nevertheless seen as credible because they emanate from the official sector 'home.'

The next decade will necessitate change and innovation on a massive scale, not only by governments but by the private and nonprofit sectors. The nonprofit sector must develop greater capacity for innovation, working in partnership with governments and the private sector and on its own. Scaling up innovation capacity involves leadership: learning and communicating what has worked, and what has not, across various subsectors and organizations. In effect, the sector needs to reinforce its own internal transmission belts.

## ENHANCED PUBLIC VISIBILITY AND CREDIBILITY

The nonprofit sector helps create the kind of communities Canadians want to live in. It is a source of innovative solutions that brings top talent, expertise and deep knowledge to addressing complex problems. But, its work and potential are often overlooked by Canadians, especially those who are not active volunteers or donors. Indeed, the lack of public understanding of the modern charitable sector was described almost twenty years ago as its "achilles' heel" (Saxton, 2004), and little has changed.

Research consistently shows that the public's familiarity and knowledge of the charitable sector enhances trust in it, which positively affects giving and volunteering (Bekkers, 2003; Bourassa and Stang, 2016; McDougle, 2014). However, in a study of Canadians (using data from the Muttart Foundation and Imagine Canada) Farwell, Shier and Handy (2019) find only a modest level of familiarity with the sector. They argue that, if we are to improve confidence in the sector (rather than have trust diminished by the occasional scandal), we need to start by "helping the public to better comprehend who charities are and what charities do."

The imperative of enhancing public understanding has been amplified by COVID-19 as donations in 2020 dropped by an estimated 20 percent (CanadaHelps, 2021). As Marina Glogovac, President of CanadaHelps, observes, "This puts vulnerable Canadians who rely on charities at risk." This risk to vulnerable communities will worsen if donations and volunteering decline further and if the sector cannot attract skilled employees because it is not perceived to be an employer of choice.

Enhancing its public visibility and understanding requires information about the sector. But more than information, it requires collective, concentrated leadership that can build a positive, realistic narrative about the sector and its work for communities and the environment.

## A MORE EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE SECTOR

The global pandemic and its convergence with the Indigenous/racial justice movement has pulled back the curtain on the structural inequities that have long existed but were ignored by many. The nonprofit sector and philanthropy are key to addressing many of these inequities and injustices, working through public policy, service delivery and community engagement. But the sector has considerable to work to do in becoming more inclusive and equitable in its own perspectives and in its leadership and workforce (Statistics Canada, 2021b).

A more inclusive and engaged approach to sector-wide leadership is an opportunity to build toward greater equity within the sector as well as crafting policies that promote address inequities and promote greater inclusion and equity. While some work, such as the Equitable Recovery Collective hosted by Imagine Canada, is already underway to give greater presence to communities that tend to be excluded within the sector and within public policy, these efforts need to be scaled up and integrated in the work of the traditional 'mainstream' of the sector.

## LEADERSHIP AS STRATEGIC 'INTERMEDIARY'

Creative thinking about the options for a new (or strengthened) sector leadership 'entity' should not be constrained from the start by what we call it. The terms most commonly used to refer to a body dedicated to increasing visibility and advancing policy for a sector are 'peak association,' 'infrastructure' or 'umbrella' organization (Abramson and Mccarthy, 2002; Balassiano and Chandler, 2010; Minkoff, Aisenbrey and Agnone, 2008; Prentice and Brudney, 2018; Prentice et al., 2020; Seibert, Williamson and Moran, 2021; Young, 2001). These are inadequate terms to frame this conversation, however, because they imply a vertical structure with the leadership body at the top. Instead, we need to think about the mechanism for sector-wide leadership differently – as an 'intermediary' – which is a relational rather than an organizational or hierarchical idea (LeRoux, 2009; Moss, 2009; Fraussen and Halpin, 2018). Intermediaries can be thought of as "transmission belts" (Albareda, 2018) that shape and collect policy preferences from participants and transmit these to policy makers, and carry back policy intelligence and know-how to their participants, members and constituencies.

Intermediaries are also boundary spanners and are "deliberately positioned to act in between by bringing together and mediating between different interests" (Marvin and Medd, 2004: 84). They are defined by the relations within which they are situated, rather than by a particular

organizational characteristic or form (Moss et al., 2009). Through the formation of relationships and partnerships, intermediaries build trust and confidence, enable coordination, and facilitate learning and innovation in order to create and advance shared policy agendas (Albers, Wohlgezogen and Zajac, 2016; Williamson and Leat, 2021).

## THE MANDATE FOR A LEADERSHIP INTERMEDIARY

A leadership intermediary would need to undertake, or facilitate, five key roles.

1. **Mobilize the sector and engage in public policy**: The leadership body needs to develop (or access) policy capacity and a government-relations capability and engage in policy, budgeting and regulatory processes (Lauzière, 2021). The ability to do this federally and provincially is a mammoth task, and would rely on collaboration with other sector organizations and networks, and provision of ongoing feedback to sector stakeholders.

2. **Use Research to Advance Knowledge of Policy Issues**: Sound, convincing policy depends on evidence from credible sources. The leadership mechanism will need to tap into and assimilate data and research (which existing national and subsector organizations may already produce) and mobilize it for policy and for greater public understanding about its work. Imagine Canada implemented a government relations program in 2019, which is reported to have resulted in gains of policy awareness:  for instance, interventions on behalf of the sector in the House of Commons have risen to an average of one per sitting day, up from zero in 2017 (personal communication). It is a big sector working on a variety of sector-wide issues with multiple stakeholders, however, so that effective use of evidence for policy will need to be a widely shared endeavour.

3. **Engage with the Sector and Promote Learning and Inclusion**: The notion of a new leadership body as an *intermediary* means its work needs to be embedded in relationships with other nonprofit organizations and networks. It needs to engage, listen, and learn from the sector. The intermediary also has an important role in working across the sector to create a collective identity as a sector, thereby enabling its size, strength and shared interests to be better understood. Of course, given its diversity, interests and priorities across the sector are not likely to be uniform or initially convergent. Leadership is more than listening and aggregating, however: it also involves influencing, shaping and crafting common positions (van der Pijl and Sminia, 2004). The intermediary will need to mediate and develop priorities (supported by evidence) that can be generally agreed upon, ensuring that the parts of the sector that are often marginalized are heard and taken seriously.

4. **Facilitate Partnerships and Collaborations:** Affecting change on most issues requires collaborative, cross-sector efforts. An important role of the leadership intermediary is to be part of, and assist other sector organizations to participate in alliances and partnerships, including with the public and private sectors. This means being a credible,

trusted and valued partner sought out by others, which is linked to the creation of greater awareness and a new narrative for the sector.

5. **Be a Voice, Create Public Understanding**: Increasing public awareness and changing the narrative about the sector is important in its own right and a prerequisite to being influential in public policy. This entails shaping ideas and agendas, convening conversations, communicating directly and through the media to the public and stakeholders, and amplifying the work of other sector organizations.

These roles are presented as key functions in the work of successful policy intermediaries as drawn from the research literature, not as critiques of the work of existing sector organizations. One outcome of conversations about the sector's future may be the determination that the sector is already doing a fine job at all or most of these roles, and no further action is needed or desired.

## THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Context is both a facilitating and a constraining factor for sector-wide leadership. The Canadian context for a leadership intermediary or alliance is characterized by:

- diversity of subsectors, missions and size among the 170,000 charities and social purpose nonprofits that constitute this 'sector,' not all of which identify as being part of the sector;
- notwithstanding this diversity, many subsectors are already vertically organized into provincial and/or national associations;
- several cities and provinces have cross-sector associations, such as the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), SaskNonprofit, Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (CCVO) and Pillar (London, ON), but many provinces/regions lack place-based infrastructure;
- Indigenous and racialized communities tend to be marginalized and significantly under-funded (Pereira, Abokor, Ahmad and Abdikkarim, 2021);
- Quebec is distinctive in its infrastructure for relationships of civil society organizations with the provincial government, and its nonprofits/community organizations often have limited relationships with those outside of Quebec;
- nonprofits operate under a different regulatory regime than charities, with little data on them;
- the substantial 'quasi-governmental' parts of the sector (e.g. universities, colleges and hospitals) rarely participate as members in sectoral umbrella organizations or contribute financially or in other ways to sectoral public policy work; and
- there has been an enduring lack of financial resources to support peak leadership organizations and networks; and it is increasingly difficult to rely on membership fees as the primary means of sustaining these mechanisms.

Given this context, a policy leadership body will face challenges of: coordination, degrees of inclusion, incentives for participation, power dynamics, and resources.

## THE CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

The aim of this paper is to generate open and expansive dialogue that considers different options for a new leadership mechanism. Given the proposed mandate, we focus on several key questions:

- What should a new (or strengthened) policy leadership mechanism do particularly well?
- What kind of structure and processes would best facilitate this work?
- Is this a new mechanism or an existing one made stronger?
- How would it get started and be sustained?

This paper identifies the strengths, shortcomings and tradeoffs of different models of sector leadership based on the international research literature and on experiences in Canada and elsewhere. We then pose a series of questions as a guide for further discussions to assess design, incentivize participation and resource a new leadership mechanism.

## OPTIONS FOR A STRUCTURE

Is there a preferred structure or organizational form for an intermediary? It depends. There is no one 'best' structure for all circumstances (Andrews et al., 2010; Johnson, 2014; Ostrom, 2015; Zald and Garner, 1987), rather it depends on:

- the nature of the problem(s) to be solved;
- the environment or context;
- time and resource constraints; and
- preferences in the inherent tradeoffs among different design features.

Some structures will do some things well, others less well. Choosing structures means giving priority to some values and capabilities over others. It also requires taking into account the specifics of the Canadian context.

### TRADEOFFS: STRUCTURES DO SOME THINGS BETTER THAN OTHERS

Our assessment of options for a structure is based on two basic assumptions. First, this intermediary has some organizational form, rather than being occasional, unstructured collective action. Second, it is 'by and for the sector' – autonomous of government.

To succeed in as a sector policy leader, an entity needs to: facilitate and coordinate the participation of others in the sector; manage power relationships among participants and build enough trust to work together; and establish a basis for legitimacy to be considered a sector 'leader' (Albers, et al., 2016; Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips, 2002).

Different structures do these things in different ways that reflect differing principles and values. An entity can be more or less formalized in its structure and operations; centralized or diffused in where decision-making power lies; and its legitimacy and policy capability can derive from being a *voice of* its participants and constituencies (i.e. a representative) or a *voice for* participants and constituencies (i.e. a leader).

To help think about the strengths and limitations of different models this section discusses three dimensions of structure – degrees of formality, centralization and the basis for leadership – and provides examples of each.

Of course, the structure and operations of a leadership mechanism also depend on the availability and sustainability of financial and human resources to carry out its work, which are uncertain at this point. The importance of supporting resources should not be under-estimated, however: inadequate resources have been a key factor in limiting the success and sustainability of leadership bodies. It can be assumed that foundations (and/or others) will need to invest in at least the start-up phase. This analysis focuses on the pros and cons of different models, assuming some flexibility to align with available resources and, assuming sector interest in a new leadership intermediary, that financial support can be attained.

## 1. INFORMALITY / FORMALITY

One dimension is the degree of organizational formality. 'Informal' refers to unincorporated, primarily volunteer-led collectives that operate with few codified procedures or systems. 'Formal' entities are legally incorporated, which facilitates hiring staff and undertaking contracts. Formality is further strengthened through codified decision rules and systems, and sometimes through organizational hierarchies or federated structures (Jenkins, 2006; Lu, 2018; Zald, 1970).

Key advantages of an informal structure are ease of start-up and wind-up, and the ability to operate with more limited financial resources. However, informality often does not deal well with complexity, and the success of an informal intermediary may be dependent on the specific people involved. Without a strong corporate 'brand,' informality also tends to limit public visibility and it can be difficult to sustain momentum over time. A formal structure better facilitates grappling with complexity and promotes branding and growth, but is more resource-intensive.

The degree of formality is not fixed, however. An informal entity can evolve into a more formal one, as Zald (1970) demonstrates with the transformation of the early YMCA from local autonomous, community action groups into a very formal, federated structure. It is quite rare, however, that a formal structure transitions to an informal one unless it is in the process of winding down its operations. Table 1 contrasts a highly informal versus a highly formal approach, recognizing that there are variations between these extremes.

### TABLE 1: INFORMAL VERSUS FORMAL INTERMEDIARIES

| Informal | Formal |
|---|---|
| • Ease of start-up /wind-up<br>• Cost efficient; often relies on volunteer contributions; a host organization may provide support<br>• Can evolve to a more formal entity over time based on needs<br>• Smaller size is manageable but limits inclusion; wide engagement may be hard to achieve<br>• Valuable for information exchange/shared expertise<br>• Lacks a brand and often operates with limited transparency<br>• Power imbalances may be difficult to manage; some participants dominate in the absence of decision rules<br>• Without resources, momentum may be difficult to sustain; priority projects may take longer to achieve | • Time and expense to incorporate<br>• More resource intensive; incorporation facilitates hiring staff/contracting<br>• Once created as s formal structure, it remains so; thus it is important that the mandate is clear and shared at start-up<br>• Size is flexible; may accommodate more participants; degree of inclusion depends on processes<br>• In addition to information exchange, enables more intensive, sustained policy engagement<br>• Has its own brand, but may compete with existing organizations in the network<br>• Formal decision rules can mitigate power imbalance, avoid dominance by certain participants<br>• Momentum and sustainability are resource dependent |

References: (Albers et al., 2016; Langen, 2012; Willems and Jegers, 2012; Weiler and Reißmann, 2019)

### TABLE 2: EXAMPLES OF INFORMAL AND FORMAL INTERMEDIARIES

| Informal | Formal |
|---|---|
| **The Recovery Collective hosted by Imagine Canada (2020 - )** | **National 'Peak' Associations such as Imagine Canada and National Council of Voluntary Organizations (NCVO) in England** |
| In September 2020, Imagine Canada convened a group of 9 leaders of organizations/networks mainly representing marginalized communities (plus an academic, a facilitator and Imagine Canada staff) to discuss and develop strategies for recovery and rebuilding of the charitable sector post-pandemic. The emphasis is on discussion, generating ideas and using networks for access to governments and the wider sector. The Collective operates without a formal structure, funding or decision rules. | Most of the national cross-sector policy-oriented 'peak' associations, such as Imagine Canada or the National Council of Voluntary Organizations (NCVO) in England, operate as formal structures. They are incorporated, registered charities with organizational (and possibly individual) 'memberships' and other contributors. |

In reality, many intermediaries operate in a hybrid form, combining aspects of both formality and informality. These include many women's organizations over the waves of feminism (Bordt 1997), policy 'roundtables' or groups created in Canada in the 1990s and in Australia and England more recently.

## TABLE 3: EXAMPLES OF HYBRIDS: FORMAL INFORMAL INTERMEDIARIES

**Voluntary Sector Roundtable (Canada, 1995 – 2001)**

Recognizing the need for greater coordination, voice and visibility of Canada's charitable sector, a group of 12 leaders from national organizations formed the Voluntary Sector Roundtable (VSR) in 1995. Its primary aim was to create a dialogue with the federal government around policy matters. The initial plan was that the VSR would operate in a structured way for three years, but that the relationships built during this period would have longer term effects. Throughout its life, the VSR was intentionally very 'light' in infrastructure, relying on secretariat support of its member organizations and the individual leaders involved to take carry the lead on particular projects. Additional financial support was provided by the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation. The VSR set four priorities: enhancing accountability of the voluntary sector; developing mechanisms for dialogue with government; increasing charitable tax incentives; and reworking the definition of 'charitable.' At the end of the third year, a decision was made to continue for several more years as its work was not completed, although progress was being made in all of these areas (SDC, 2004). The VSR established and supported the [Broadbent] Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector which held national consultations with the sector and whose 1999 report laid out an action blueprint for the sector. The Roundtable was instrumental in creating a series of joint tables with the federal government that identified policy priorities, and led to the creation of the federal Voluntary Sector Initiative in 2000. It disbanded following the VSI.

**Australian Charities Crisis Cabinet (2020 -)**

The Australian Charities Crisis Cabinet was formed in early 2020 to give a policy voice to the charitable sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, and help charities support their communities, "especially those most vulnerable to increased harm, and ensure as many charities as possible can effectively contribute to building flourishing communities after the crisis." The unincorporated Charities Crisis Cabinet is comprised of 19 CEOs of the large national organizations, broadly representing key subsectors. Rather than having a formal membership, it "draws on the experience, knowledge and networks of leaders from across the diversity of the charities sector to highlight issues and consider responses." By early April 2020, the Cabinet had presented a letter to the Prime Minister and Treasurer outlining seven "critical asks" for government support for charities. https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2020/04/charity-leaders-unite-to-lead-sector-through-covid-19/

**The Civil Society Group (England, 2021- )**

In November 2021, 55 charity umbrella bodies in England launched the Civil Society Group with the goals of increasing collaboration among members, 'clearly articulating shared priorities and views' and better engaging with government (Ricketts, 2021). A strategic oversight group of 16 organizations, including four places reserved for different charities on a revolving basis, will set priorities; three sub-groups will focus on policy development, influence and information sharing; and NVCO and the Directory of Social Change provide administrative support (at least initially) . Decision making is intended to be by consensus, but should a vote be required, each member has one vote with a decision requiring a simple majority. Most of the resources have come from the participating organizations, with some additional dedicated project funding.

## 2. DECENTRALIZATION / CENTRALIZATION

Centralization refers to the locus of responsibility for decision-making (Albers et al. 2016; Christensen, Lægreid and Rykkja, 2016). Some intermediaries are 'bottom-up' where, by authority or practice, participants/members set strategic direction and make policies in all except routine decisions, delegating to leaders responsibility for coordination and implementation. At a minimum, decentralized structures require leaders to consult extensively with and take direction from participants before taking action. While technically every incorporated charity or nonprofit has an Annual General Meeting (AGM) where members can give direction to the board, these are seldom robust means of bottom-up decision-making. However, organizations operating on feminist principles, as network-based or as federations in which power lies with local 'chapters' tend to have a more genuinely decentralized form.

This contrasts with intermediaries in which authority and power are concentrated in a small leadership cadre, who may consult with the members/participants but can act autonomously. An advantage of a more centralized approach is greater unity of coordination, less silo-thinking among participants and faster decision making (Albareda, 2018). A downside is a potential feeling of disenfranchisement by participants if their engagement is limited. Centralization is often assumed to imply professionalization and dominance of staff over decision-making; while related, the two concepts – centralization and professionalization – are different. As Table 4 shows, decentralized and centralized intermediaries offer different advantages and limitations.

### TABLE 4: DECENTRALIZED VERSUS CENTRALIZED INTERMEDIARIES

| Decentralized | Centralized |
|---|---|
| • Actors have equal power status; can create a sense of community | • Leadership cadre has responsibility for decisions and policy |
| • Active engagement by and exchange among members may enhance trust and learning among participants | • Leaders need to create a sense of community and trust through engagement with participants; risks a sense of participant alienation if such processes are limited |
| • Decision making can be time consuming; coordinated action slow | • Enhances coordination, consistency and speed of decision making, particularly during crises |
| • Weak governance capacity reduces credibility and ability to respond to events/crisis | • Creates governance capacity that may facilitate strategic direction-setting, learning and innovation |
| • May be difficult to resolve conflicts when there is no shared agreement | • Leadership can mediate conflicts but must be trusted by participants by being consultative and transparent |
| • The more effective a federated structure is over time, the more likely it will become more centralized or dissolve | |

References: (Willems and Jegers, 2012; Albers et al., 2016; Christensen, Lægreid and Rykkja, 2016)

## TABLE 5: EXAMPLES OF DECENTRALIZED AND CENTRALIZED INTERMEDIARIES

| Decentralized | Centralized |
|---|---|
| **Canadian Federation of Voluntary Sector Networks (2002 - )** | **Imagine Canada (2003 - )** |
| The Federation was formed in 2002 as a network of provincial/territorial, regional and grassroots nonprofit and voluntary sector networks with the common purpose of building connections, enhancing cohesion and capacity among these place-based networks. Pan-Canadian public policy dialogues were to be facilitated by conversations across local groups. Many nonprofits felt that their work (health, social services and education) was primarily influenced by provincial policies and funding, and that the national scene was irrelevant to their work. The impetus to create the federation was in part a response to the VSR which had a national focus, and a perceived inattention to regional concerns.<br>An informal, decentralized federated structure was chosen to avoid the common challenge that in most 'national' organizations central Canada dominates, and the centre often obtains project funding that is not a priority of affiliates but it then expects local bodies to deliver the project without adequate resources. The leadership model was intentionally 'distributed' with the intent that a powerful centre would not emerge: a research centre at Carleton University – which had the advantage of being a neutral broker not trying to position itself as an organizational leader – initially served in a loose coordinating role. The secretariat, whose role is to convene and connect rather than direct, then rotated among regional networks.<br>Information sharing and convening have been a focus of the Federation's work. From 2008-2014 several national 'Gathering of Counterparts' (with support from the Muttart Foundation and provincial governments) were held to further relationship building. Since then, the networks continue to meet monthly by phone/online to share information (particularly related to the effects of COVID-19). No national projects have been undertaken since the Counterparts Gatherings and any engagement in policy is done mainly by the member networks, in part due to the lack of resources and in part because information sharing is value enough for many members. | Imagine Canada was founded in 2003 to carry on the work of its predecessor, the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy (founded in 1981) and National Voluntary Organizations (NVO). Imagine Canada is a registered charity that aims to serve as the policy voice and champion for the sector. Funding relies mainly on a combination of 'membership' fees, research contracts and specialized services, and support from foundations, corporations, individuals and the federal government. In 2019 the annual budget was $3.9 million. Its membership, referred to as 'investors,' consists of sector organizations and currently numbers about 125, with fees ranging from $100 - $500 annually depending on organizational size. Members can vote at the AGM, participate at events and receive information about the sector. In addition, the category of sector 'champions' are a smaller group (N = 68), with fees of $5,000 annually, that have access for their senior executives to an annual executive roundtable as well as deeper engagement in policy discussions. A 14 member board is responsible for overall governance and strategic direction. Most of the work is carried by the staff of 27, rather than the membership. While Imagine Canada often hosts summits or forums that are open to the sector beyond the membership and are intended to 'take the pulse' of the sector on key issues, strategy and operations are centralized in the board and staff.<br><br>**National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) – England (1919 - )**<br><br>England's counterpart to Imagine Canada, NCVO, established in 1919, is similarly a centralized structure. The main difference is that NCVO is larger, with a membership of 16,000, an annual budget equivalent to CDN $15.8 million and a staff of almost 100. Its funding is a mix of fee-for-service, donations and membership dues (which range from 0 for small charities to CDN $1,500). As with Imagine Canada, the locus of decision-making rests with the board and staff. |

References:
(Campbell and Speevak Sladowski, 2009; Carter and Speevak Sladowski, 2009)

## 3. REPRESENTATION (VOICE OF) / LEADERSHIP (VOICE FOR)

A third aspect of structure is how members/participants are intended to relate to their constituencies and to decision-makers. In a 'representation' model, members/participants serve as representatives or delegates who are the *voice of* their specific constituencies, and leaders are their delegates. Members/participants and decision-makers are not autonomous from their constituencies (Yoshioka, 2017). Rather, they serve as the voice and mouthpiece of these constituencies, and are expected to have a close listening relationship with, may be chosen by, take direction from, and be directly accountable to their constituents. This is similar to a populist version of democratic practice. This representation structure is often used in policy 'forums' (Fischer and Leifeld, 2015) that bring together representative delegates from various subsectors for discussion and deliberation on issues.

In some cases, representation may be more symbolic, ensuring a mix of 'categories' of organizations, interests or demographics at the table – a focus on 'who' participates rather than 'how' they do so. If the representatives lack policy capacity, expertise or interest, the result is often both a lack of connection to communities and a lack of leadership (SDC, 2004).

In a leadership model, decision-makers might engage and hold conversations with members/participants and with the organization's various constituencies and stakeholders. But, they have a trustee relationship, and are charged with responsibility for acting as leaders, exercising their judgement and applying expertise in being a *voice for* and advancing the strategy and work of the organization as a whole.

### TABLE 6: REPRESENTATION VERSUS LEADERSHIP

| Representation / Voice of | Leadership / Voice for |
|---|---|
| • Strong actual and sense of engagement by participants/constituencies; greater accountability to constituencies if participants are well connected to them | • Stronger sense of organizational identity and connection, rather than constituency based; ability to speak for and be accountable for the intermediary as a whole |
| • Representatives may have limited policy expertise and experience | • Leaders (and professional staff) may have greater policy expertise |
| • Decision making and action can be slow depending on process for representatives to get direction from constituencies | • Greater ability to take action in a timely manner |
| • May be difficult to form cohesive collective identity as an intermediary and to agree on/mediate differences of policy positions; Power imbalances among representatives need to be managed | • Leaders may not be well connected to participants; means of engagement/conversation and building trust is important to connect with the base |
| • Selection of representatives may foster diversity of participants, but inclusion is dependent on other factors, and diversity may be token if representatives do not | • May not be inclusive/perceived to be elitist |

- have the capacity to participate in meaningful ways
- Valuable for information exchange/shared expertise and for engagement with governments on specific policy issues

- Focus on policy engagement

References: (Lindsay, 2000; Fischer and Leifeld, 2015)

## TABLE 7: EXAMPLES OF REPRESENTATION AND LEADERSHIP INTERMEDIARIES

**Representation / Voice of**
**Scottish Civic Forum (1999-2005)**

Scotland's Civic Forum was created to achieve one of the principles of devolution – that power would be shared among the government, parliament and people. The Forum was designed to be pluralistic and inclusive. Any civil society organization (including unions, business/ professional associations and faith organizations) could be a member and participate at the annual meeting. Subsectors (e.g. environment, justice, education) each had a fixed number of places on a 50 member council, along with the national umbrella organizations; their elected representatives supervised the program and work of the Forum. A small elected Management Board oversaw staff and regular business. The principle was to enable deliberation among a diversity of civil society interests and with government, but also to provide 'safety in numbers' so as to prevent any organization or interest from being coopted by government. The greatest challenge was to" keep criticism and proposals constructive and realistic, not allowing them to become wish lists from those without direct responsibility for delivery" (Lindsay,2000) The Forum ceased in 2005 when government funding ended, although there have been petitions (McFarlane 2015) to resurrect it.

**Leadership / Voice for**
**Voluntary Sector Roundtable (1995-2001)**

While also informal, the VSR was a leadership model as opposed to a representative one. It was comprised of leaders of a cross-section of 12 national charities and nonprofits, and had no members. The main reason was to facilitate engagement in policy and public discourse in a timely manner. The leaders were invited, rather than elected or chosen through an open, democratic process. While the participants were expected to engage with their organizations/ communities, there was no formal requirement to do so. Decisions were collective, and the VSR spoke with one voice, and was seen by the federal government as a collective policy voice for the sector, prompting the creation of the Voluntary Sector Initiative. For many smaller organizations in the sector, however, they were perceived to be elitist and not in touch with parts of the sector and parts of the country.

**Nature Conservancy of Canada** (a typical example) The Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) is a national nonprofit, that is part of an international confederation, whose mission is to protect natural areas, primarily by purchasing and then managing them for conservation. The NCC has a wide range of donors, including foundations, corporations, governments and individuals, and partners, but not members. Its pan-Canadian work is led by regional vice-presidents who are staff members, rather than regional 'representatives.' The leadership is based on expertise and function rather than representation of local/regional interests.

These three dimensions of structure can be combined in different ways. For instance, if an intermediary is set up quickly to fill a leadership gap, it might be informal, centralized and leadership-oriented. If the intent is to create a sustained grassroots-based organization, the structure might be formal, decentralized and representative.

## THE QUESTION OF MEMBERSHIP

Guidance on whether a policy intermediary should have a formal membership – rather than a more informal set of 'participants' – depends on a variety of considerations. Whether designated as members or as participants, both require care and nurturing. Throughout this report, we are careful to ensure that we are not assuming a formal membership, but instead refer to participants and constituents.

The advantage of a membership is that it promotes information sharing and internal democracy and makes leadership accountable. Research on the role and management of memberships in policy intermediaries, which have organizational rather than individual memberships, is limited. Most work on membership associations is based on a US dataset of professional and business associations (Gazley, 2013; Tschirhart and Gazley, 2014), and is not directly transferable to policy intermediaries. There is a perception that memberships have gone out of fashion, however, or simply that they are difficult to retain.

In the early 2000s, Skocpol (2003) raised the concern that national US advocacy organizations had become management-dominated, allowing their memberships to atrophy or were being created with no memberships at all, thereby reducing their ability to be democratic. Managers and 'cheque-book contributors' or 'supporters' who had no involvement in group decision making had replaced members (Halpin, 2006). A study by Walker, Mccarthy and Baumgartner (2011) reports little evidence of this. Rather, they found that from the 1970s non-membership public affairs associations did not displace membership organizations, but both grew at a roughly proportional rate. The current environment, however, is one with high expectations of transparency and scrutiny of charity governance and financing. So, we can expect that a national policy intermediary will need to demonstrate who it represents and justify any claims of speaking for the sector.

The value of a formal membership is also related to structure. In a decentralized or representative model, decision making power is bottom-up, and there needs to be a mechanism – a membership – for defining who has such power. Card-carrying members are less integral to an informal or centralized intermediary, although engagement and two-way dialogue with participants, communities or constituencies has been demonstrated to be a key factor in sustaining diverse coalitions (Kegler and Swan, 2012). It is quite clear, though, that policy intermediaries cannot survive financially on membership fees alone which on average constitute about 8.5 percent of total revenues (Lasby and Barr, 2021).

## SUMMARY

Is a particular model more common or successful in policy leadership and advocacy? The evidence is limited, but points to a critical need for both policy capacity and engagement with participants/ constituents. In a study of policy intermediaries in the European Union, Albareda (2018) reports substantial variation in structure. About 37 percent of intermediaries put an emphasis on their policy capacity (to generate and transfer information to policy makers), but their ability to engage with members is under developed; 15 percent are designed mainly to represent and involve participants and an equivalent percentage are low in both member involvement and policy capacity. In a meta-analysis of 46 studies of nonprofit policy engagement, Lu (2018) found that professionalization, not formalization, has a positive effect on advocacy engagement. Nonprofits that rely heavily on professional staff and expertise have higher levels of advocacy (see Mosley 2010, 2011), but board support and active involvement of constituents are also important.

## PROCESSES CONSIDERATIONS

In any of these structures, three key processes must be integrated and given special attention.

### 1. MANAGING THE INTERFACE AND THE INTRAFACE

The *interface* refers to how an intermediary manages its connections with external partners, stakeholders and communities (Albers et al., 2016). A broad, dense and active set of linkages promotes learning about others and issues, enhances credibility and encourages alliances. An extensive interface may be particularly valuable in centralized, leadership-based structures as a substitute for a membership.

Dense and wide interfaces that span different types of communities can be achieved in several ways:

- Regular forums, summits, and other means of two-way dialogue
- Members/participants that are expected to listen, report and be accountable to their organizations, constituencies and networks
- Participation of the intermediary in other alliances and networks.

For intermediaries with large, inclusive memberships or 'partners' – that is, where a variety of networks and communities are already internalized – more attention may be need to be focused on intra-organizational processes of coordination and collective action.

The *intraface* is the internal process of how participants/members are involved. It serves to integrate participants' activities and contributions into a collective sense of identity and

coordinated action (Albers et al. 2016). It involves managing and mitigating power imbalances among participants so that all feel valued, trust is reinforced and there are means to assess participants' interests and prioritize their issues (Halpin, Fraussen and Nownes, 2018). As Dunleavy (1991), argues, "no group leader can publicly represent members' interests without regular and open procedures for gauging their views." Developing the idea of a two-way transmission belt, Albareda (2018) notes that the relations of leaders and participants has to be bi-directional: leaders need to understand the issues and priorities of participants, and they influence their participant base through their own expertise and knowledge of policy processes.

This intraface might be strengthened through:

- Internal dialogue and regular communication and consultation between leadership and participants
- Mechanisms and rules for decision making that reinforce a sense of collective choices (Ostrom, 2015)
- Leadership that reflects the participants with a fair, transparent process for selecting leaders.
- Strong governance capacity with an engaged board (in more formal intermediaries)

## 2. INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Who participates, how many and how inclusive is this participation shapes an intermediary's identity and credibility. How large and inclusive should intermediaries be, and how do they create incentives for participation and inclusion?

In most policy leadership mechanisms, the participants are organizations or networks, rather than individuals, although some are mixed. While a larger number of participants may enhance an intermediary's claim to represent and speak for a (sub)sector, the optimal size is partly determined by the relevant population of organizations and constituencies, and is dependent on the mission. It also takes a formal structure and time to build a large base of participants, and size often has to be traded off against solidarity and coordination of action. A representative body for all of civil society that serves primarily as a deliberative forum, such as the Scottish Forum, depended on a large, pluralist membership in order to serve as a counterweight to government power. Here, size is a direct function of mission.

Intermediaries that are specialized in their purpose and the communities they serve may value solidarity over diversity, and thus be intentionally exclusive in who participates. As a decentralized network of networks focused on information sharing rather than policy influence, the Federation of Voluntary Sector Networks has few participants but is nevertheless inclusive of the small number of provincial and regional networks. Adding more participants would likely not help accomplishment of its mission. A centralized leadership roundtable such as the VSR

was small by design but intended to include the major subsectors through national organizations that would reach out to their networks, although it faced criticism that it was not as inclusive as it could have been.

How to reconcile the advantages of size versus solidarity and how to create incentives to participate is a longstanding discussion in 'interest group' literature. In an influential book, Mancur Olson (1965) argued that large groups will not act in their shared, collective interests without selective, private incentives to do so: for instance, tangible benefits such as reduced insurance rates and access to 'trade' information that come only with membership. Olson's argument has been widely critiqued, however, with a variety of studies showing that public, purposive incentives – the action goals – matter more in motivating participants than private benefits (Hager, 2014; Jenkins, 2006; Klandermans, 1997; Solebello, Tschirhart and Leiter, 2016; Yoshioka, 2017).

In the current context of a global movement for Indigenous and racial justice and the exacerbation of economic and social inequities by COVID-19, diversity and inclusion need to be taken seriously and probably matter more than size. For a sector-wide intermediary focused on policy, diversity and inclusion would likely include the major subsectors, and place a particular emphasis on involving communities that tend to be marginalized. It would also be expected to have a broad geographical reach, including Quebec. The twin challenges thus involve how to make inclusion manageable and how to address the inevitable criticisms of those excluded.

The signalling of identity and inclusion at the launch of an intermediary matters, and thus purposive incentives for participation and a critical mass of diverse participants (Fredette and Sessler Bernstein, 2019) need to in place from the start.

As good practices of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) across the sector indicate, real inclusion is more than representation of differences. Many associations encounter a paradox of inclusion and exclusion, as Solebello, Tschirhart and Leiter (2016) observe. Attempts to become more inclusive may raise issues related to organizational identity and they accentuate internal power relationships: becoming more diverse and inclusive over time changes the identity of an organization, and may be resisted by existing members. Managing this tension points to the importance of the interface and participant involvement. In a study of large coalitions involving a diversity of community sectors, Kegler and Swan (2012) show that opportunities for participation and transparent decision-making practices that enable participants to have substantive input are essential to participant satisfaction and retention. This takes leadership and staff to manage active engagement, which raises the issue of the level and sources of resources to support this infrastructure (Leroux and Goerdel, 2009; Mosley, 2010).

## 3. ATTAINING RESOURCES

How would the intermediary attain the financial, human and other resources needed to operate? In general, an intermediary's resources have to be either donated or generated in-house, or some combination. The in-house options include membership fees and earned income through sale of goods and services. This assumes a formal structure of incorporation as a legal entity. Experience demonstrates that it has become very difficult to sustain an organization primarily on membership fees. Most peak bodies, such as Imagine Canada or NVCO, also depend on contracts for research and other services, and on specialized programs such as the Standards Program and Caring Companies. Even then, philanthropic support is required to be a viable entity.

For informal bodies volunteers may provide the human capital and a host or 'backbone' organization the financial support, technology and other administrative systems. Indeed, a third party host is essential if the intermediary is not a legally incorporated entity capable of entering into contracts and hiring its own staff. Even for large, formal leadership bodies donations from foundations and corporate sponsors are likely required (Lu, 2018). The pros and cons of government support have long been debated, driven by concerns that it potentially leads to loss of autonomy or even outright co-optation. The weight of evidence, again mainly from the US, suggests that government funding for intermediaries has a positive effect on their level and success in policy engagement (Leroux and Goerdel, 2009; Mosley, 2010, 2011; MacIndoe, 2014; Fyall and Allard, 2017). Based on a meta-analysis of existing research, Lu (2018) reports that commercial income has no significant relationship with advocacy engagement.

It seems apparent, then, that a new leadership intermediary, unless very small and informal, would require some external support.

## HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

So far, we have covered aspects of the mandate, structure and processes, and resources for a new leadership intermediary. An important question is: how would it get started? Who could best instigate and animate this start-up phase?

As experience demonstrates, such mechanisms seldom arrive fully formed, but they evolve. The initial creation process and creation matters, however, because this sends important signals about its collective identity, intent and potential (Mueller, 2021), which develops over time into deeper synergistic action (Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Hardy, Lawrence and Grant, 2005). While an evolutionary process, the signals and incentives for engagement that are generated by the initial form are critical.

This reinforces the need for a preliminary phase of inclusive conversations about need, roles, specifics of design and complementarities with existing organizations and networks – and critically to determine if there is sector buy-in. The Muttart and Max Bell Foundations are supporting this in two phases: 1) a series of interviews with a diversity of sector leaders; and 2) more wide-ranging conversations, roundtables or forums among a diversity of people in the sector. Information on the timing and how opportunities for participation will be widely circulated.

It has to be recognized, however, that timing is short. If a new leadership intermediary is to become a serious actor in pandemic recovery and rebuilding, it will need to be mobilized in the next year or two.

## CONCLUSION

As a conversation starter about the need for and design of a sector-wide policy intermediary for Canada's charitable and nonproft sector, this paper has outlined considerations of structure, making the case that these involve tradeoffs. These tradeoffs include ease of creation, resource requirements, and emphasis on representation versus leadership. No matter the organizational form, intermediaries need to manage external and internal relationships and the associated power dynamics, create incentives for participation and inclusion, and attain resources. The level of resources and degree of professionalization required flows from and influences the specifics of how these are managed.

More specific guidance on how to structure, fund, manage and engage a new policy intermediary – or build out existing organizations – requires discussion of what matters to the sector. We propose some questions to animate deeper conservations on these values and considerations.

1. This paper argues that Canada's charitable/nonprofit/philanthropic sector lacks public visibility, is not seen to speak with a collective voice and is not as engaged in public policy (at all levels of government) as it could or should be. Do you agree with this assessment? Do you see any need for stronger sector-wide leadership? If so, why?

2. If yes, could such leadership be adequately developed by existing organizations so that there is no need for additional organizing or a new organization? Is so, how might this occur?

**Let's pursue the idea that a new entity (an alliance, intermediary or organization - whatever we call it) might be created**:

3. What should be its main purpose or mission?

4. In terms of structure, should this new entity be:
   a. Informal (work together by agreement, not incorporated) or a more formal, incorporated organization?
   b. One with strong, central leadership or one in which power is decentralized and held by participants?

5. Who would participate – individuals, national organizations, provincial and regional networks, a mix?
   a. Are they a formal, dues-paying 'membership' or simply 'participants'?
   b. How would its leadership be selected?
   c. How inclusive should it be, and what are the incentives for a diversity, particularly those from marginalized communities, to participate?

6. What are the most important things this entity needs to do to be credible with the rest of the nonprofit sector?

7. How would you recommend this entity: a) engage with other sector organizations; and b) its leadership engage with members or participants?

8. How might it be financed?

9. How would it get started, and who could assist in this process?
   a. When should this happen?

10. What else needs to be done to enhance the sector's effectiveness in engaging in public policy and developing better relationships with governments and the private sector?

**Let's now pursue the idea that greater sector-wide leadership is needed, but a new entity is not;** rather an existing organization or network (or set of organizations and networks) could take on this role.

11. Which organization(s)/network(s) could undertake this fortified leadership role? What, if any, changes to them would need to occur?

12. What other changes would be needed across the sector to support this organization(s)?

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