
A CRISIS IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

Martin Garber-Conrad, *Edmonton Community Foundation*

ABSTRACT Whether 2010 is a real crisis or merely another difficult year, we have an unprecedented opportunity in the non-profit sector to begin doing things differently. Collaborations and perhaps even restructuring will see us through these challenging times, ensuring that our missions survive. To maximize the benefit to our communities, we need to begin talking together, not just as organizations, but as a sector. Imagine Canada's engagement and convening strategy can help us do that.

RÉSUMÉ Que 2010 soit une véritable crise ou seulement une autre année difficile, nous avons une occasion sans précédent de commencer à agir différemment dans le secteur à but non lucratif. La collaboration et peut-être même une restructuration nous aideront à traverser ces temps pénibles, assurant ainsi la survie de nos missions. Afin de maximiser les bienfaits pour nos communautés, nous devons commencer à dialoguer, non seulement en tant qu'organismes, mais aussi en tant que secteur. L'engagement de la part d'Imagine Canada et sa stratégie de convocation peuvent nous aider à atteindre cet objectif.

KEYWORDS Nonprofit sector; Imagine Canada

MARTIN GARBER-CONRAD is CEO, Edmonton Community Foundation (ECF), 9910-103 Street, Edmonton Alberta. Before joining ECF he led a community-based social service nonprofit for 18 years. His volunteer activities include serving on the Imagine Canada Advisory Committee.

YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD THE OLD SAYING THAT "A CRISIS IS A TERRIBLE THING to waste." Leaving aside for the moment whether the recent economic troubles do actually constitute a crisis for the nonprofit sector, there are plenty of people who figure that, this time around, things are different. Even if the recent economic recovery has averted the worst of the crisis, the sector is still going to face significant challenges. Some provincial governments will surely deal with their own deficits by cutting funding to nonprofit organizations. On the donation side, the last three months of 2009 will likely be telling. Donors will either be confident enough in the recovery to resume giving at near normal levels or, still feeling the uncertainty of the past year, hold off until the situation is clearer. If the latter happens, it will be too late for many organizations to make appropriate adjustments.

Those of us who work in the nonprofit sector feel the weight of these uncertainties somewhat more than the general public. We know how vulnerable the nonprofit sector is at the best of times. This vulnerability is not at the level of threatening the destruction of the sector – it is too imbedded in the functioning of Canadian society – but there is the possibility of serious damage to the sector, including the loss of organizations and the important work they do in communities across the country. Work with the most vulnerable in our communities – those with the weakest voice and the least political influence – it is always the first to be at risk.

What a few close colleagues and I have been wondering lately is whether now is finally the time to try to do something systemic about this situation. We have reacted to past challenges in creative but limited ways. We have diversified our funding sources, developed new products, and learned to operate more efficiently. In fact, we cut most of the fat from our organizations in the early 1990s and have trimmed what little was left in response to inflation (with which funding never keeps up) and increased demand for our services. From now on, we'll be delivering less service. The time is past for doing more with less. If we're honest, we must admit that we can only do less with less, although, if we're particularly committed (and fortunate), we may be able to keep doing some of the things that matter most.

There is another level to this challenge. If, indeed, the current economic changes approach the level of a genuine crisis, there will be more than cutbacks and reduced resources. Some organizations, both large and small, will be forced to close. If we assume that it is only redundant or less competent nonprofits that will close, we can safely do nothing. If, however, we think a bit deeper about the nature of sector funding, it is more likely that nonprofits working at the edge – with innovative, complex programming, with more marginalized clients, with less political and social support – will be most at risk. If we don't take a sector-wide approach to the crisis, it is foolish to assume that it will all work out for the best.

As we ponder this situation, we are aware of some missing pieces in our analysis. Although we tend to work closely with organizations similar to our own in our own communities, most of us don't know much about how things are elsewhere in Canada. It may be possible that similar organizations in other communities know things that might be useful to us ...promising practices, particular structures, new ideas. Few of us are part of national organizations that routinely share creative solutions, and most of us have had

to cut back on what limited conference travel and professional development we used to be able to do.

Even in our own communities, there is little opportunity for conversation between sub-sectors: social service organizations rarely talk with arts organizations; health organizations rarely meet with environmental organizations; and international development organizations don't usually deal with anyone on this continent. Our silos mirror rather well the ministerial and departmental silos of all three levels of government.

So, is there a way to change this? Is there a way for the nonprofit and voluntary sector to begin to act like a real sector? Could we meet and discuss common issues and similar problems? Could we learn from other organizations that are quite different from our own, in different regions of the country? Could we even begin to formulate a sector position on such things as workforce development, government funding, charitable definitions, advocacy, or good governance? Could we find a way to raise the profile of the sector in the minds of our governments and in the hearts of the general public? Could we seek not just warmer feelings but a fuller understanding of the work that the sector does throughout our country? For example, the huge contribution of volunteers and their recruitment, training, and support are not without cost. On a purely economic level, the impact that the sector makes through cost-effective service delivery, employment of Canadians, purchases of local (rather than offshore) goods and services, helps to make our communities liveable.

Accomplishing all of this is a tall order for sure. We have spent several decades keeping our own counsel, forced to compete for limited resources. Collaboration has been discouraged and growth has been suspect. Infrastructure has been minimized by the suppression of administration costs. Some organizations that lack new technology are still trying to get online with donated 386 computers!

We need to talk, and not just with the usual suspects. We need to find a way to move beyond "information sharing" meetings and begin to discuss real issues – hard issues. We need to see, for example, if we can find some things that most of us would want to say to our governments. We need to find a way to talk with the business community beyond asking them to sponsor another golf tournament for us or donate items for our next silent auction. We need to talk with each other to see if we really do have common problems that we could solve together. We need to begin acting like the sector we might grow up to be.

This will not be easy and it won't be quick. If we're going to begin a serious conversation about the future of the sector, we need to make a commitment for the long term. The sector as we know it took the better part of 100 years to emerge in its current form. If we are serious about making changes, it's going to take time, effort, and resources—certainly on the order of 10 years. And, despite best efforts, we may not get it right the first time. As I said, if this isn't really a crisis, we may not want to bother. On the other hand, this task won't get any easier if we put it off until good organizations close their doors, innovative programs are lost, and problems in our communities worsen.

The good news is that in addition to increasing dialogue in our own communities, we have an unprecedented opportunity to explore the possibility of a national conversation

on these matters – and soon. Imagine Canada is committed to “An Engagement and Convening Strategy for the Charitable and Nonprofit Sector.” And it's starting now. Events will be held in 2010 in regions across Canada, inviting nonprofit sector organizations of all shapes, sizes, and missions to come together to debate issues, discover new approaches, and make new connections; to talk about sector-wide issues, challenges, and innovations; to discuss what we want to say to the other sectors in society, especially business and government; to explore what we might learn from each other to get us through the current crisis and better equip us to serve our communities. These regional conversations will generate the content for a national gathering in 2011 to continue the discussion and formulate concrete action plans. After that, the process will be repeated. Imagine Canada is committed to long-term engagement.

Interesting issues are already emerging from preliminary discussions: labour force (both paid and volunteer) issues, funding mechanisms, governance and accountability, limits on advocacy, social return on investment (SROI). There is likely a lot more we can talk about – with organizations large and small, from rural and urban areas, with paid staff and volunteers, with the whole range of missions that help make Canadian communities work for all citizens.

If the current economic situation does indeed constitute a crisis, let's not waste it. Whether the worst is over or there is more yet to come, much in our sector will not be the same again. We have an chance to use this particular time to make things better for the sector and for our communities. We ignore this opportunity at our peril!

If you don't have all the answers yourself, please consider the coming year as the right time to begin a new conversation – not just for your own organization or sub-sector, but for all of us. We can be stronger together if we converse and, in due course, take action. This new thing that Imagine Canada is up to could be an excellent first step. Please consider taking part – I will be. Let's not merely wait for things to happen to us. Instead, let's work together to build our collective future.

NOTES

¹ Lauzière, Marcel. (2009). *Imagine Canada Engagement Strategy*. Paper. URL: <http://blog.imagineCanada.ca/about> [November 27, 2009].