
A data partner for the sector

Ottawa has become a source of optimism and opportunity for the nonprofit sector. It's worth re-reading that sentence and thinking about how different the situation was a few months ago. In the wake of controversial charity audits and questionable funding announcements, the relationship between the sector and the federal government was tense and lacking in trust.

Upon taking office, the new government signalled that they intend to take a different approach. The restoration of the long-form census was an important step. Another was the finance minister's mandate letter, which explicitly instructed him to "allow charities to do their work on behalf of Canadians free from political harassment, and modernize the rules governing the charitable and not-for-profit sectors."

The sector has been taking stock of the opportunities presented by this new context. After the cabinet was announced, Imagine Canada noted the connections that many ministers have to the sector. Philanthropic Foundations Canada called the government's invitation to discuss new charity regulations "the most promising one we have had in a decade." And Mowat NFP recently released a paper about how the government-sector relationship is "On the Mend," and now is the time to collaborate on better legislation for the sector.

The "advocacy chill" [appears to be thawing](#). In that spirit of optimism, it's worth taking note of another opportunity — one that aligns with the new government's agenda and could do a great deal to help the sector. Now is the time to think about how the federal government can be a better data partner.

An open data mandate

When the federal cabinet received their marching orders, every mandate letter included a commitment to make more government information "open by default." Two departments were tasked with leading this initiative — the Treasury Board and the Ministry of innovation, Science and Economic Development — and specifically with increasing access to digital data.

This wasn't entirely surprising, since open data was discussed during the election campaign. But the government has gone out of its way to reiterate its commitments around openness since taking office, which suggests that it intends to deliver on them.

These are also relatively inexpensive promises to keep, which matters in the current budgetary context. Every government wants some "quick wins" in their policy agenda — things that make them look good and can be implemented more easily than big-ticket items. Opening up data certainly fits the bill.

So the question is, how will this commitment be implemented? There are any number of priorities the government can set when deciding what information to open up, and how. That's where the social sector's voice is needed.

Data for social good

Data is already a critical part of the work nonprofits do. Consider the census: researchers use it to understand social trends, service providers use it to target their work, and advocates use it when they need hard evidence to influence decision makers.

When the long-form census disappeared, the social sector learned a painful lesson in how critical high-quality government data is to our work. Now that there's a more constructive partner in Ottawa, it's time to reverse that perspective. Nonprofits should be thinking about what new opportunities exist around data and articulating them as the government makes its plans.

An example from abroad may be helpful. The [Justice Data Lab](#) is a partnership between the British government and organizations that work with ex-offenders. It gives those organizations access — in a controlled and anonymized way — to re-offending data for their clients. That allows them to measure the impact of their work in a way that wasn't possible before and to better understand the pathways to rehabilitation for offenders.

That initiative wouldn't have been possible without the British government, which is the keeper of data on criminal offenses. But it also wouldn't have happened without a clear request from the social sector. They're the ones who made the case for the Justice Data Lab and secured a pilot project on that basis.

Finding a partner

Canada already has some experience with these types of data partnerships. There's the National Homelessness Information System, for example, which pools data about homeless populations from agencies across the country. Although the specific applications may vary, this concept can be extrapolated to other parts of the sector. Whether an organization works on poverty reduction, climate change, community engagement, or mental health, there's probably a way they could benefit from the government sharing more information.

However, it takes two to tango. If nonprofits want a better data partner in government, they need to articulate their needs. Roger Gibbins [recently made the case](#) that policy advocacy is an essential part of the charitable sector's work. As the advocacy chill ends, data policy can be a timely and constructive "ask" for organizations to include in their conversations with government.