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How Funders Can Support Deeper Citizen Engagement With the Non-Profit Sector

By Matt Price

We live in a new era of engagement that is redefining how we make change in the world, with implications for NGO practitioners and funders alike. Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol documented[i] a similar transition in the late 1960s, as large membership organizations (like the once widespread men's and women's service clubs) were eclipsed by groups that saw citizen participation as something more passive: organizations encouraging supporters to finance the work of "experts" who wrote reports and lobbied on their behalf. Since the turn of the century, the latest transition has seen the internet break down that model, replacing it with a "digitally mediated" participatory one that brings citizens back into the equation.

I have experienced this latest shift directly, both as an NGO practitioner and as an advisor to foundations. The new paradigm is challenging our assumptions about what works and forcing organizations to experiment with new engagement strategies. For example, because media's traditional role as information gatekeeper has eroded, non-profit organizations now employ a diversity of tactics to reach people, including through social media. I have written about this shift in *Engagement Organizing*, a forthcoming book with UBC Press. This piece will explore something the book does not: how funders can help organizations thrive in this new era of engagement.

First, it is important to understand what has changed. Skocpol's research about the passive era of non-profit work coincided with the traditional media's heyday. Citizens generally accepted the information delivered by a handful of TV networks and newspapers. Today, people have many more choices about where they get information, as well as whether to share it, contribute by commenting, or create their own. We now have a much more participatory orientation to information that shapes our expectations towards institutions, including those in the non-profit sector. Citizens now want to be invited into the conversation. The new model is about interactivity and transparency.

While most NGOs have embraced the new engagement tools, many still do not understand the deeper transformation. It is now common for larger NGOs to have a position dedicated to digital communications, or even a digital department, but many see this role as a means of simply pushing content online. In essence, it is a continuation of the broadcast mode of "talking at" supporters – only now through the internet. "Digital-first" organizations have also recently disrupted the sector by

“talking with” supporters and getting them directly involved with the mission. Groups like Avaaz, Open Media, SumOfUs, and Leadnow have between them several million Canadians on their electronic lists, grown via the use of e-petitions and responsive social media work. These new groups vie for attention, relevancy, and donations.

The birth of these groups has created a healthy debate about “clicktivism.” Is shallow online engagement – like signing and sharing electronic petitions – as effective, or desirable, as showing up in person and volunteering? Some argue a mouse click is an entry point to a conversation about doing more: scaling a “ladder of engagement” on the way to volunteering or participating in other ways. Moving supporters from one to the other requires good organizing.

It is something all groups do to some degree. With two or more people acting together, there is a need to define roles. But that’s different than situating organizing at the core of the mission, and consciously practicing the best organizing methods. Groups like the Victoria-based Dogwood Initiative, with its mission to create British Columbia’s largest network of organized voters, have accomplished this. Countless other community groups have honed practical and replicable organizing methods over several decades of doing this type of work.

Recent presidential campaigns in the United States have reintroduced some of these organizing practices to a new generation. Howard Dean showed that the internet could bring large numbers of supporters out of the woodwork. However, his campaign didn’t always know how to keep them plugged in. Barack Obama drew on his community organizing background, and on organizing guru Marshall Ganz (who had worked with civil rights activist Cesar Chavez), to create a structure that engaged the tens of thousands of people who wanted to volunteer for him. The combination of these methods with new technology is what some call “engagement organizing.” Canadian groups have been adapting these tactics to all kinds of missions, from advocacy to tree planting.

So what about funders? How can philanthropy support and enhance the trend towards greater citizen engagement? Here are five recommendations for philanthropists:

Extend timelines

Ultimately, engagement is relationship building, and this is a time consuming process. Foundation officers are often under pressure to show results and demonstrate a return on investment. This can lead them to support concrete and discrete “products” that can be counted as accomplished deliverables according to annual timetables. However, building a constituency takes time – as people internalize a mission, as leaders are identified and trained, and as joint activities build solidarity among supporters. Two years is a tight timeline for this type of work; three or more is better. One example is Ecology Ottawa, which identified a need to build its constituency beyond downtown Ottawa, where it was already strong. Its team spent two years door knocking in suburban Orléans just to build relationships there.

Invest in people who invest in people

Organizing requires a shift in focus from the expert out front to the facilitator out back. Funders need to identify and support good facilitators (“organizers”). Groups like ACORN Canada work hard to keep their experts in the background; for example, if an ACORN staffer is quoted in the media instead of one of their volunteer leaders, that staffer is expected to buy a round of beer for the team as a “punishment.”

Ongoing training for new leaders is a key part of the equation. This can also present challenges for foundation officers since good organizers are often less visible. Their success is sometimes only apparent once their work is complete. Groups that claim to be organizing without having dedicated, trained organizers are not going to get very far – they need the resources to hire such people.

Invest in tech to scale

The average person can only keep track of about 200 relationships. After that, they need tools. Luckily, off-the-shelf solutions exist that don't break the bank. One example is NationBuilder, an online platform and database that can host websites, track relationships, and integrate with social media and donation tools. These systems allow organizations to track thousands of relationships and achieve real impact. However, this also requires a culture of good data management along with its integration into an organization at all levels. For a funder, this may mean investing in data nerds or data training (or both), as well as in the hard costs for tools and programming.

Require engagement metrics

Extending timelines and investing in people can sound soft and vague, but good organizing is actually measurable, and funders can hold groups accountable for these items. Groups can measure the number of contacts (and growth of them) across various platforms. This includes email, phone numbers, and followers on Facebook and other social media. They can also measure the number of acts of engagement (clicks, event participants, volunteers, donors, etc.) and the number of trained leaders running volunteer teams. Even if funders don't ask for these metrics, groups should be measuring them anyway in order to see which engagement tactics are working and which aren't. For example, the Gosling Foundation in Ontario has been working with grantees to encourage engagement organizing, with groups like the Couchiching Conservancy near Orillia now measuring (and mapping) its contact list so that its staff can systematically add new supporters by knocking on doors and adding people to its e-newsletter.

Reduce dependence on you

A group that is practicing good engagement should be asking its supporters to donate to its mission. If things are going well, they should be keen to do so. Thus, a group practicing engagement organizing develops a donor base to support its work. Funders can assist with this process by investing in fundraising itself. Some groups have email lists of supporters – prospective donors – who they may never have asked to donate. Matching phone numbers to emails and investing in programs to solicit donations is one good way of developing a donor base. The Dogwood Initiative managed to reduce its reliance on grants from 85% of its budget in 2002 to 37% in 2015, while also quadrupling its budget. Interestingly, its grant revenue in absolute terms has continued to rise as foundations increase their support for Dogwood's work because it has built a larger constituency.

Of course, these recommendations may not work for all groups. Some just starting out with engagement will require general support and others will have more sophisticated challenges that require targeted grants. Nevertheless, philanthropy has a role to play in fostering all good engagement. It has never been easier to identify constituencies for change, but truly engaging these constituencies still requires resources. With smart investments, funders can help get more citizens involved in fostering positive change in this exciting new era of engagement.

[i] Skocpol, Theda. 2003. *Diminished Democracy: From Membership To Management In American Civic Life*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.