
Putting a Spotlight on Networks as a Model for Influencing Public Policy

Title: Putting a Spotlight on Networks as a Model for Influencing Public Policy

Author: Cathy Taylor

Published in: *The Philanthropist* , Networks

ISSN: 2562-1491

Date: April 2, 2018

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2018/04/putting-a-spotlight-on-networks-as-a-model-for-influencing-public-policy/>

Date of PDF Download: August 14, 2020

This is the first article in our series about the role of networks in the non-profit sector. The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and the Ontario Nonprofit Network.

In the last few years – and even more obvious in the last few months – there has been a spotlight on the role of non-profits and charities participating in, leading, convening, and contributing to public policy in Canada. This spotlight is in large part a result of the Canada Revenue Agency’s (CRA’s) review of political activities and Consultation Panel report,^[1] but not exclusively so.

It has been articulately argued in *The Philanthropist* and in the wider non-profit and charitable community that non-profits make a vital contribution in shaping public policy. Northcott (2014) has noted that “Civil society organizations — non-profits and charities — have a long history of playing important roles in that policy process.” But what is the best way for organizations to play that role?

The Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) is pleased to explore the model of networks as a possible answer. We’ve convened a series of articles looking at the role that networks have played and can continue to play within, and on behalf of, the non-profit sector in the areas of public policy and advocacy. The series will explore networks according to four themes: network theory and practice; geographically based networks; issue-specific networks; and support and infrastructure for networks.

This series arose from a gathering held in June 2017 that we convened with the support of *The Philanthropist*. A number of local, provincial, and national sector-wide organizations across the

country that work on public policy for the sector at large attended it – all that either use, or are considering using, a network model.

An important part of our conversation together was about the unique or innovative features of a network approach and “networked advocacy.” We are getting better at understanding and communicating the value of the public benefit non-profit sector overall, but what is the inimitable contribution of non-profit networks that focus on public policy that affects the breadth and depth of the sector? And even if some of us are not structured as networks, could there be value in taking a network approach in our advocacy work? This series reflects the thinking that arose in the 2017 gathering: a common desire to work more effectively together.

For the purposes of this series, we are taking the following for granted: non-profits, charities, and non-profit cooperatives focused on public benefit, not member benefit,^[2] have a critical role to play in public policy – and, in fact, they have an obligation to do so, as [Gibbins \(2016\) has argued](#).

This is a timely series. Yes, networks are not new – think of the women’s suffrage movement, the underground railway, or the early days of political organizing. And yet there are so many new ways that networks now operate; social media, technology, and access to information have changed the network landscape and brought the network language and structure to the forefront of other movements. Think of Idle No More, the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, or #MeToo.

Networks can be a useful tool for public policy because the network approach helps to identify common cause and then distribute power and resources to involve many people in building solutions. To address the complex issues that face the sector, network approaches have proven to be better suited than a more formal organizational approach (ONN, 2015). Network expert June Holley puts it this way: “When collective action is useful, a network approach brings system change by: improving the quantity and quality of relationships and knowledge of how people are connected; mobilizing more leadership, expanding opportunities for people to step into leadership positions; increasing inclusion and communication leads to tapping new resources; generating more actions (like collaboration) that lead to breakthroughs; and facilitating and scaling impact.”^[3] We can all agree that our sector’s public policy work could benefit from collective action.

Four articles

There is a burgeoning field of network theory – what makes smart networks; how to build and evaluate networks; mapping networks; skills needed to develop networks, etc. – which is now more accessible than ever. Holley has been on the forefront of networking thinking and her *Network Weaver’s Handbook*^[4] is consistently the go-to resource for those developing networks. The first article in our series will therefore delve into **network theory and practice** in more detail to provide a framework and understanding of what we mean by networks in the context of public policy.

The second article will explore how this actually applies on the ground – using a storytelling approach and showcasing the non-profit sector’s **geographically based networks** at the regional and local levels that focus on public policy. Their founding stories, successes, and challenges will contribute to our understanding of how we can use networks successfully to move the bar on public policy issues that affect the public benefit non-profit sector.

We also know that many organizations are engaged in **issue-specific networks** focused on public policy change linked to issues such as climate change, housing, child care, and poverty. How has the network model been useful to advance a public policy agenda on an issue-by-issue basis within our sector? What are some of the successes and learnings in this type of network structure? The third article will take a case study approach and learn from the effective use of networks to advance public policy goals on specific issues.

One of the challenges of network development and implementation is that the network structure has distinctive elements. Holley notes that networks require a different type of investment in new processes, mindsets, and structures for working. She describes the following characteristics of networks as distinctive from traditional top-down organizations: openness and transparency; loose boundaries and structures invite a diversity of perspectives and encourage healthy disagreement; focus on innovation, experimentation, and learning; leaders who encourage peers to act and take initiative; responsibility is shared; organization is bottom up, emergent, and responds to current context.^[5] The last article in this series will therefore shine a light on the **support and infrastructure** (such as people, processes, and technology) needed to fund, support, and sustain networks focused on public policy and public policy issues. How does the unique contribution of networks translate into a case for support – one that is worth supporting?

Essential learning

Public policy work and advocacy are essential to address the complex and emerging issues that affect the communities across this country that public benefit non-profits serve. This work requires many participants and organizations with both network and public policy skillsets, knowledge, and attributes, who also have a learning organization mindset and willingness to explore and fail. Networks might be one mechanism with a compelling structure that can help us collectively harness the efforts of the non-profit sector in the public policy domain.

This series will examine the role networks have played and potentially could play in strengthening the non-profit sector's advocacy in public policy, looking at how they're structured, what they require, what challenges they face, why they sometimes work well, and why they sometimes do not.

We look forward to learning from the series and hope you do too.

References

Gibbins, R (2016) "The Moral Imperative for Policy Advocacy," *The Philanthropist*, February 1.

Northcott, A (2014) "Letter From The Guest Editor: Creating Better Public Policy: The Roles Of Canadian Charities," *The Philanthropist*, February 26.

Ontario Nonprofit Network (2015) "Networks in Action: The Way We Work," available at: http://theonnc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ONN-Networks-Action_2015-06-05.pdf

^[1]<https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/resources-charities-donors/resources-charities-about-political-activities/report-consultation-panel-on-political-activities-charities.html>

^[2] Ontario Nonprofit Network. website: <http://theonnn.ca/our-work/our-regulatory-environment/public-benefit-nonprofits/>

^[4] Holley, June. Network Weaver Handbook

^[5] Ibid

^[6] Ibid.

Illustration by Paul Dotey