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The Ties That Bind: Four Case Studies of Issue-Based Networks

By Ben Liadsky

This is the fourth 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.

Networks take on many forms and go by different names, such as coalitions or alliances. Canada is full of examples of groups of organizations, individuals, and communities coming together to address what are often big, systemic issues such as poverty or climate change. This article profiles four networks: International Child Protection Network of Canada (ICPNC); Green Budget Coalition (GBC); Campaign 2000; and BC Alliance for Arts + Culture. Each profile tells the story of how these networks came to be, what they have achieved and hope to achieve, and how they have done it. While each story is unique, some themes emerge that speak to the broader reasons that non-profit networks exist. For instance:

- People and organizations need a galvanizing issue to come together. In some cases, a network is a response to a government action. In others, it forms as a recognition of a political opportunity and a proactive action to mobilize.
- Strength in numbers is an important factor for members in deciding to join and remain in networks. Members appreciate that there is work that they can't do alone. They also appreciate the opportunity to connect with others who have shared interests.
- Over time, relationships in the network can grow stronger. Those interviewed often said they are most proud of improved and closer relationships among members.
- Finding resources — both funding and staff time — remains a challenge. Those interviewed are pleased with what they have been able to do, but also note that this work requires continued support.
- Ensuring continued engagement requires thoughtful deliberation. How decisions are made and how to work collaboratively are important questions that need to be addressed. Some iteration is often required.

International Child Protection Network of Canada: Seizing the moment to advance child protection issues

The International Child Protection Network of Canada (ICPNC) is “a collaboration of international child-centered development and humanitarian organizations, academics, and experts committed to working together to protect children and advance children’s rights.”^[1]

The story of the ICPNC began in 2013. At the time, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was rolling out its Child and Youth Strategy (developed in 2010) that prioritized child protection.^[2] For Save the Children Canada, an international child-centred non-profit organization, this presented an opportunity to raise the profile of child rights issues.

“Back then, the Canadian government, led by the Conservatives, had a particular focus on children and youth and we felt that there was some momentum within the government to work on these issues,” says Olivia Lecoufle, child protection advisor and global lead on children and harmful work at Save the Children Canada.

A meeting arranged in January 2013 was attended by more than 50 members from diverse children rights organizations and individual consultants. Very quickly, it became clear that members could achieve more through a network approach. Lecoufle, who was instrumental in getting the network set up and continues to play a significant role within it, noted, “Though we represent different organizations, we are all working toward the same goals of children having their rights protected.

“This network helps to provide an opportunity for shared learning and also gives us a stronger voice with government. It was clear to everyone that this was the best way forward if we want to help children. We have different expertise and compete for funds sometimes, but the need for child rights organizations to be more closely involved with one another is central to deliver our mission.”

The network model that ICPNC embraced emphasized consensus building and shared decision-making. Early on, stakeholders decided that the ICPNC would not be an incorporated organization. Rather, a host organization (which, up until this summer, was Save the Children Canada) would take responsibility for arranging meetings and facilitating products such as the annual report. Meanwhile, a steering group would oversee strategic planning decisions that affect all members, while interested members would manage specific working groups such as children’s participation or policy and engagement.

Says Lecoufle, “For decisions that affect the whole membership, we work with every member through the AGM to discuss and go through consensus building to get to a decision that is approved by everyone.”

The fact that both Conservative and Liberal governments have accepted it underscores the network’s success. “When the Liberals came to power, their focus shifted to feminism. There was no longer a child protection unit,” says Lecoufle. “However, we continued to have a meaningful dialogue with the government. It’s convenient for them to reach out to the network rather than individual organizations. They have appreciated our feedback and we have been consulted on policy and members have made joint submissions.”

As noted in the network’s 2017 annual report, “Following the release of Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in June 2017, the [Policy and Engagement Working Group] has taken part in ongoing engagement with key interlocutors at Global Affairs Canada to share ICPNC’s

analysis, best practices, and recommendations on how prioritizing child rights and protection will be key to realizing the FIAP's objective.”^[3]

The network has provided one-stop shopping for the government, allowed members to work more closely on critical policy matters, and helped create closer relationships.

For Lecoufle, the most transformative change has been cultural: “I can easily pick up the phone and talk to a colleague from another organization and share what we're working on, build ideas, discuss ways to coordinate, etc. It has really had an impact on us being able to work better because we have those relationships.”

She also identified the network as creating a space for sharing and trust where members feel comfortable talking about different aspects of child protection. As an example, she highlighted the issue of safeguarding: the organizations, which work all over the world in diverse contexts, must ensure that the work they do is safe for children. “The network provided an opportunity for members to share examples. Some were clearly more sophisticated than others, so it was good for others to hear. It has helped create a strong community of practice.”

The network has had to evolve and adapt over time. Consensus building for the policy and engagement working group has not always been easy. As a result, it developed specific governance rules. Now each member must approve a policy document before adding their name to it.

Moreover, as a self-funded network, funding and resources can be a challenge. The network has a small budget but no dedicated staff, which means all members participate and manage individual jobs. Yet, as Lecoufle notes, “This also means everyone is equal. It's nobody's job, so it's everybody's job.” In other words, members continue to engage in the network because they see value in it.

World Vision Canada is now hosting the ICPNC, which has recently undergone some strategic planning through two all-member meetings and with the support of an external facilitator. The hope is that this recent planning and new energy will help the network maintain its momentum.

ICPNC snapshot

- Founded: 2013
- Corporate status: Unincorporated
- Decision-making: Consensus. Host organization plays a leadership/organizing role as part of a steering group that has responsibility for strategic decision making among other things. Participating members lead working groups for specific issues.
- Number of members: 15 (Two classes of membership: Nine “active” and six “participating”). Individual expert consultants also are part of the network.
- Membership fee: Yes (varies depending on size and membership type).
- Paid staff: No (Although most of the budget is used to hire consultants for specific work).
- Funding: Membership fees, support from host organization (currently World Vision Canada).

Green Budget Coalition: Collaborating for budget action

So, you're sitting at a downtown Ottawa bar having a drink with fellow environmentalists and then-finance Minister Paul Martin, and he turns to your group and says, “Your organizations should get

together and submit one set of recommendations instead of a dozen.” What do you do?

As legend has it, something along those lines happened in 1999 when Martin told several representatives of national environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) that their sector could be more effective if it spoke with one voice on budget matters.

Soon after, 14 ENGOS submitted their first joint recommendations under the Green Budget Coalition moniker in time for the 2000 budget.

Almost 20 years later, the coalition is still going strong. Says Andrew Van Iterson, manager of the Green Budget Coalition at Nature Canada, “What helps it work well is that it has a very clearly defined mandate, which is to work on the federal budget. It happens every year and provides an annual cycle that we can follow. The budget helps frame the work within a limited scope. The coalition doesn’t address policy or regulatory issues. This makes it easier for diverse groups to find common ground on budget issues.”

Over time, the coalition has earned the respect of both government and members. It prides itself on developing a relatively short list of a few priority recommendations with longer lists (developed by issue-specific working groups) of 15-20 recommendations. Working on the language that goes into the recommendations takes a lot of back-and-forth and requires consensus building.

Members understand that the GBC avoids criticizing the government in its recommendations, notes Van Iterson. “We work in a constructive fashion. We will often say things like ‘we appreciate what the government has done, but here are the next steps’ for example. We are not here to take a critical stand. Individual members know that they can take stronger stands on their own if they need to.”

Developing budget recommendations is a months-long process that involves research, outreach, and political and governmental engagement that begins anew each April. Usually in early June, the coalition will reach out to government civil servants to test out ideas and see what resonates as a sort of listening round so members can get some feedback. Once the document is finalized, further work is done to engage a variety of stakeholders that may include the Prime Minister’s Office policy director, the Clerk of the Privy Council, the finance minister (or chief of staff), and the minister of environment and climate change, among others. Depending on the issue, different members of the coalition will meet face-to-face with various stakeholders. Once the budget is announced (usually in February or March), individual members will put out media releases that speak to their issue.

This most recent budget cycle resulted in arguably the coalition’s biggest success to date. “We had focused on increasing protected areas for 2017–2018. Our ask was for \$1.4 billion over three years. This year’s budget had \$1.3 billion committed over five years, which was close to what we wanted. We were a lead player in this and our advocacy helped lead to 115 parliamentarians writing to the finance minister effectively endorsing the position of the Green Budget Coalition” says Van Iterson.

The coalition has had its ups and downs over the years, but a core group of members has always remained. Approximately 10 years into its existence, it hired a consultant to do a 360-degree evaluation, which found that the coalition was more valued by government than by its own members. As a result, the coalition developed a charter to more clearly define its membership and roles.

The charter also introduced a membership fee, which has ensured buy-in and sustainability. “The fact

that members provide money forces discipline on the coalition and really on me to ensure that it provides enough value. Some members dropped off initially, but membership has grown incrementally since then and now we have more members than ever before,” noted Van Iterson.

In addition to the financial contributions, the coalition has helped strengthen relationships and build trust between members. “There is strong social capital. Members are willing to have lengthy discussions to find common ground. Over time, groups all know that we can’t effectively promote 15 issues. They know the coalition will be around for years to come and have confidence that when particular funding is sunsetting or that a certain issue needs attention that the coalition will focus on it.”

The diversity of the membership has occasionally helped to open doors and provide access. Van Iterson shared an example from the recent Conservative government years when many ENGOs felt they were not viewed favourably. Several coalition members with a rural, wildlife focus were still very much engaged and, as a result, facilitated access for other members to meet with the government.

The coalition takes pride in its work to engage with government and political staff and develop recommendations that have the support of membership. In the future, the coalition recognizes that there is potential to further increase its leverage by building public support and developing more of a media presence to mobilize Canadians to action.

Green Budget Coalition snapshot

- Founded: 1999
- Corporate status: Unincorporated
- Decision-making: Consensus. Two co-chairs help steer/organize. Working groups come together on particular issues.
- Number of members: 21
- Membership fee: Yes
- Paid staff: Yes (one staff member).
- Funding: Membership fees, foundation grants, support from host organization (Nature Canada).

Campaign 2000: Working together for social justice

In 1989, Ed Broadbent, then leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP), stood in the House of Commons and put forward a motion to end child poverty in Canada by 2000. All parties unanimously passed the motion.

However, by 1991, people from around the country were concerned that the government was not acting to achieve the goal. They organized into a network to push for action – and so began Campaign 2000.

Housed and supported by Family Service Toronto, Campaign 2000 is a national, non-partisan coalition of 120 partners who believe the federal government has a responsibility to honour the all-party resolution to end child poverty.^[4] Similar coalitions now operate in other provinces and communities.

The signature work of Campaign 2000 is to put out annual national and provincial report cards on child and family poverty each November (timed to coincide with Broadbent’s 1989 motion).

The process begins each April. Anita Khanna, national coordinator for Campaign 2000, plays a lead

role in the development of the report cards, which helps engage partners. “It’s an important touch point with people on the ground. There’s a lot of data issues to figure out and sort through. A lot of back-and-forth and consulting with experts, our steering committee, and others takes place to ensure we know what data is available and that what we are saying is accurate. It’s also a time to identify gaps and gain new perspectives on a diversity of issues such as employment, housing, racialization, and everything in between that you could imagine.”

With such a diverse network, Campaign 2000 has realized that it needs to be constantly listening to be effective. In-person meetings are no longer feasible due to limited funding and the size and scope of the network, so regular check-ins through teleconferences and electronic communications help to keep people connected.

Partners are united by common cause and are knowledgeable on social justice and poverty issues, which increases buy-in. “People in this network are among some of the most open to new ideas and policy proposals from across the country. They are on the ground and see how programs and policies impact communities and see value in finding equitable approaches” says Khanna. In addition, partners are required to sign onto a partnership statement that outlines expectations and helps ensure cohesion.

On the policy front, the government has taken notice. Campaign 2000 pursues a collaborative advocacy approach. It understands and respects the fact that change can take time and that a lot of work is happening. But it will also continue to push for action and it can mobilize its network to help with those efforts. “We are a public education organization, and this is quite core to what we do,” says Khanna. “We provide tools to the public, we’re on social media, we do infographics, and during elections we provide questions to ask candidates and tips on how to engage on party platforms. We also do a lot of media work to help raise awareness.”

One of the key successes in recent years has been the adoption of a tax proposal to benefit children. “In 2012, we recommended a new child benefit proposal to better support children that would be streamlined, tax-free, indexed to inflation, and more generous. It was something we continued to highlight in the subsequent years. In the 2015 federal election, all parties came out with a child benefit proposal. The Liberal’s Canada child benefit (CCB) proposal closely followed our proposal, but was even more generous.”

Campaign 2000 has also been part of a number of other initiatives, including the call to raise the minimum wage in Ontario and push for all governments to develop poverty reduction strategies (the federal government recently announced its first Poverty Reduction Strategy).

As is the case with other networks, funding and resources are an issue. Family Service Toronto, an anchor agency of the United Way of Greater Toronto and York Region, hosts Campaign 2000. And though it does have three paid staff, their time is sometimes split on various other projects.

Continuing to build partnerships such as with recent graduates, people with lived experience, parents, and Indigenous communities are all priorities going forward. As Khanna notes, “We need to have a renewed sense of urgency on this issue. We are pleased to see that the federal government has ‘reducing child poverty’ as a priority, but I think we need to do more to galvanize people because this is an opportunity we haven’t had before.”

Campaign 2000 snapshot

- Founded: 1991
- Corporate status: Unincorporated
- Decision-making: Steering committee provides strategic direction.
- Number of partners: More than 120.
- Membership fee: No
- Paid staff: Yes (three staff with time split on other duties).
- Funding: Hosted by Family Service Toronto, a United Way Greater Toronto and York Region Anchor Agency, and donations.

BC Alliance for Arts + Culture: Strengthening the arts and culture sector in BC

The BC Alliance for Arts + Culture first began as the Greater Vancouver Alliance for Arts and Culture Society and was a direct response to Expo 86. At the time, approximately 35 local organizations worried that Expo would negatively affect their operations and that people wouldn't come to see local work. These organizations got together to advocate for the local arts sector. In 2014, the organization went provincial.

Brenda Leadlay, its executive director, notes “In BC, arts and culture organizations are so overworked and under capacity. That is why the BC Alliance exists. The expectation is that through strength in numbers we can advocate with a unified voice for the sector.”

With paid staff and a long history, the BC Alliance has continued to grow its membership and its services. Today, more than 375 organizations and more than 100 individuals make up its membership. It offers several services (either directly or through partnerships) including health benefits, job and volunteer boards, a classified section, a space finder program for locating performance or rehearsal venues, an active social media campaign, as well as programming in support of reconciliation and underserved artists, among other things.

Engaging the diverse membership takes on many forms: a weekly newsletter reaches 4,200 people, an annual conference brings together members, and the network regularly consults with communities around the province.

A key focus of the Alliance's engagement work has to do with arts advocacy. For example, its Advocacy Alerts, which are sent out four to six times a year, often include calls for action such as letter-writing campaigns.

BC has more artists per capita than any other province: more than 24,800 working artists and 98,243 culture jobs, which accounts for 3.5% of the provincial workforce and more than \$7 billion in cultural GDP.^[5] Yet according to the BC Alliance, the province ranks behind all but the Maritime provinces in per capita provincial cultural funding.

Says Leadlay, “Advocacy is really important. We want to grow both the public and private investment in the arts through campaigns we're developing and continue to work with governments at all levels. We have to make sure that the arts don't lose ground and become unsustainable. We play a leadership role in this by helping communities to set meetings, organize, undertake research, and engage in the

political process.”

This work has started to pay dividends in the political arena. In the 2017 BC election, because of the BC Alliance’s advocacy efforts, two political parties promised they would double the budget of the BC Arts Council over four years. However, once in power, the NDP only increased the Council’s budget by about 20%. It’s an issue the BC Alliance continues to fight for, while also pausing to consider the bigger picture.

“We’re aware that the public perception of the arts is that it can be seen as elitist or a special interest group. After the NDP budget announcement, we organized a post-election meeting and decided to form a committee to develop a Visionary Action Strategy. We initially had 25 people sign up and this number has since grown to 50 people. We also hired some facilitators to help us figure out what to do next and now we’re at a point with this group of people to raise the money to do a two- to three-year campaign to build public will for supporting the arts.”

As the BC Alliance continues to grow, Leadlay plans to continue to emphasize outreach, particularly outside of Metro Vancouver, and keep on top of trends and opportunities for the arts sector to connect with other sectors, such as mental health, education, and social innovation.

BC Alliance for Arts + Culture Snapshot

- Founded: 1986
- Corporate status: Incorporated as a not-for-profit organization.
- Decision-making: Staff-led programming informed by input from members and partners.
- Number of partners: More than 480
- Membership fee: Yes
- Paid staff: Yes (six staff members).
- Funding: Donations, grants, and earned income.
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[1] Annual Report 2017. ICPNC. P4.

[2] Child Protection Matters – ICPNC Newsletter. ICPNC. July 2013, Issue #1. p1.

[3] Annual Report 2017. ICPNC. P9.

[4] Our Coalition. Campaign 2000. 2018.

[5] Advocacy. BC Alliance for Arts + Culture. 2018.